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Transforming lives: Exploring the impact of transitioning on female-to-male transpersons and partners of female-to-male transpersons

Megan Marie Tesene
University of Northern Iowa

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TRANSFORMING LIVES:
EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF TRANSITIONING ON FEMALE-TO-MALE
TRANSPERSONS AND PARTNERS OF FEMALE-TO-MALE TRANSPERSONS

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Megan Marie Tesene
University of Northern Iowa
May 2011

ABSTRACT

Recent trends in gender scholarship point to an increased research focus on trans-identified persons. However, the majority of it revolves around the experiences of transpersons as individuals while ignoring the influence that transitioning has on intimacy in personal relationships. Furthermore, while previous research on FtM transpersons tends to emphasize the benefits that transmen receive from transitioning, the current study focuses on some of its negative implications. Through ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews, this research explores the experiences of four transmen and six partners of transmen who were involved in a romantic relationship during the transition process. My findings indicate that transitioning leads to a variety of consequences for both parties. While this process allows transmen to acquire the physical appearance and social status that they have long desired, it also leads to negative consequences such as losing one's queer visibility and for partners, losing their once physically and emotionally feminine partners. Transmen also find that "passing" as heterosexual men leads to obvious shifts in one's social interactions, including the presumed gendered meaning of those interactions. Interestingly, although respondents indicate that their experiences have led to more open and fluid understandings of gender and sexuality, their responses point to the heavy influence of heteronormative ideologies within the larger transgender community. This research project has the potential to contribute to the existing gender scholarship in that the experiences of the transgender community sheds new light on the intersections of gender and sexuality as well as the highly gendered organization of social life.

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This Study by: Megan M. Tesene

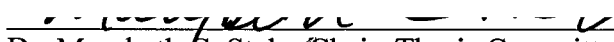
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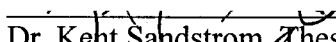
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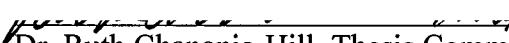
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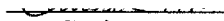
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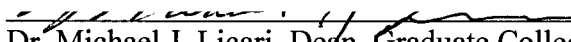
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intimate stories of their lives, something that is not easy to do, especially with a stranger. I hope that this research project sheds light on the struggles and losses that you have experienced and continue to experience as members of a society that fails to give you the visibility that you deserve. Your journeys are truly amazing and deserve to be told. I hope that I have done each of you justice in telling a part of that story here.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Gender scholarship is, for the most part, a relatively new area of study within social scientific research (Wharton 2005). Since the second wave U.S. women's movement in the 1960s, interest in how gender influences the social world has grown exponentially (Wharton 2005). Feminists and social scientists seek to explain how we live gendered lives, how gender shapes us, and how we, in turn, shape gender. Currently, this existing body of gender research revolves around the experiences of men and women, with little focus on alternative forms of gendered expression.

One such group that continues to be neglected by social scientific research is the transgender community. "Transgender persons"¹ are individuals who do not conform to the dominant male/female sex designation they receive at birth. Transpersons often change their appearance by means of clothing and haircuts, binding their breasts, concealing their penises, or with hormonal or surgical procedures which permanently alter their bodies. Each of these efforts aid transpersons in reaching a specific goal: to appear as a member of the gender/sex "opposite" from the gender/sex into which they were socialized. In making these changes, transpersons hope that they will "feel right" in their own body and that other people will perceive them as being a specific type of gendered person. Cromwell (1999) identifies several terms that transpersons use when referring to themselves and others in their community: transsexuals, transvestites, transgenderists, female-to-male (FtM), male-to-female (MtF) or "something else." For

¹ For the remainder of this paper, I use the term "transpersons" to denote this group.

the sake of brevity, I will use the term “transpersons” to include all of the above-mentioned identities.

Transpersons make up a highly stigmatized and marginalized group in Western society (Butler 2004; Cromwell 1999; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). Because transpersons defy dominant gender ideologies, they often face harassment, discrimination, verbal and physical assault, or the threat of murder (Butler 2004; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). We know relatively little about the experiences of transpersons and how they think and feel about themselves. The majority of knowledge we do have is mainly psycho-medical in nature (Cromwell 1999), and it often pathologizes and generalizes the experiences of transpersons. Additionally, psycho-medical professionals often represent transpersons as having a disease that needs to be “corrected” in some way or another (Butler 2004). This approach is problematic because it further reinforces the idea that transpersons are sick or deviant. When ideas such as these prevail, mistreatment and discrimination can ensue.

While studies of transpersons are becoming more prevalent within the social sciences (Pfeffer 2010), the amount of coverage is dramatically less than those studies focusing on more dominant forms of gender expression. This lack of coverage is problematic because it reinforces dominant gender ideologies, which purport that there are only two natural sex categories with corresponding gender designations (Kitzinger 2005; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). By continually focusing on men and women as gendered beings and leaving other groups out, social scientists reinforce the prevailing gender binary and its restrictions.

In this research project, I focus on the lives and experiences of U.S. FtM transpersons² and their partners or former partners. Specifically, I seek to understand the various effects that transitioning has on the intimate and social lives of transmen and partners of transmen. I further analyze the impact that transitioning has on the sexual and gender identities of research participants. Transitioning is the process that transpersons go through when they change their bodies and physical appearances in order to look as if they are of a sex/gender category different from the one they were assigned at birth. While not all transpersons seek to alter their bodies in this way, all of the transmen that I interviewed for this research project had undergone hormonal or surgical procedures to change their bodies.

Because essentialist beliefs inform dominant gender ideologies, the majority of Westerners believe that sex, gender identities, and sexual identities are static (Gamson 1995; Kitzinger 2005). By studying the experiences of this group, I explore if and how gender and sexual identities are malleable rather than fixed. For purposes of this study, a requirement of participants is that the FtM transperson reveals his trans-identity to his partner *after* the relationship has begun. This situation places both individuals in a unique situation where they must rethink and potentially renegotiate how they think about themselves as gendered and sexual beings.

In addition to exploring if and how gender and sexual identities change, I also focus on how FtM transpersons and their partners conform to and resist dominant gender ideologies. For instance, some scholars criticize transpersons for blending into dominant

² I use the terms "FtM transpersons" and "transmen" interchangeably throughout this research project.

sex/gender binaries (Green 1999; Lorber and Moore 2007). By conforming to the male-female binary, transpersons remain invisible, and therefore, perpetuate the idea that our dichotomous gender system is both legitimate and sufficient. In this research, I describe and analyze how FtM transpersons both reinforce and resist dominant ideologies.

By allowing transpersons and their partners to tell their own stories, I gain insight into how they experience life in our highly regulated gendered world. Risman (2004) argues that knowledge is an important tool in creating social change. She also explains that social actors can shape the social world in which they live. Other scholars have made similar assertions (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007; Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010). As a feminist, activist, and scholar, I also believe this to be true. I recognize that the prevailing beliefs regarding gender and sexuality foster discrimination and inequalities. Therefore, through this research project, I seek to shed light on an extremely stigmatized and marginalized group with the hope of creating tolerance and understanding. Furthermore, by focusing on the malleable rather than fixed nature of gender and sexuality, I hope to contribute to discussions regarding new ways of thinking about gender and sexuality which invite diversity and plurality rather than restriction (Gamson 1995; Seidman 1994).

In this study, I use symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and queer theory to make sense of the narratives of FtMs and partners of FtMs. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) proved to be incredibly helpful in that it enabled me to understand the complexities of the gendered meaning that my respondents ascribed to their bodies, beliefs, desires, and social interactions. Symbolic interactionism helps

scholars understand “how people interpret, act toward, and give meaning to objects, events, and situations around them” (Sandstrom, Martin, Fine 2010:17). In using this theoretical perspective, I was able to gain insight into how respondents assigned, took on, and interpreted the role of gender in their everyday interactions. This analysis led me to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of “doing gender” and West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) concept of “doing difference.” I find that both FtMs and partners of FtMs perform gender (and understand it) in ways that are consistent with heteronormative-informed ideologies of gender and sexuality. This finding is particularly interesting given that respondents indicate that the transitioning process and exposure to the transgender population ultimately shifted their views away from rigid definitions of gender and sexuality.

Social constructionism was also helpful in my analysis of sexuality and sexual desire. Social constructionists maintain that individuals use categories that are social creations to describe their sexual attractions and behaviors (Epstein 1987). They also argue that such categories vary cross-culturally and historically. For my respondents, I found that individuals identify specific bodies or characteristics as being sexually acceptable. However, in some cases, respondents had to renegotiate what they defined as sexually acceptable once they were confronted with a partner or desire that they once defined as unacceptable. For instance, some women partners of transmen describe themselves as lesbians or being primarily attracted to women’s bodies. When they realize that they are in a relationship with an individual who does not identify as a woman or as someone who is going to alter their body so as to appear “male,” these women partners

had to redefine what they would allow themselves to be physically attracted to. As their situations changed, they redefined their understanding of sexual bodies and desire.

Finally, queer theory also contributed to help understand the experiences of FtMs and partners of FtMs. Queer theorists often criticize other theoretical perspectives within the social sciences because of the tendency to focus on concrete categories or grand narratives which supposedly explain some social phenomenon (Gotham 2008). Queer theorists instead argue for less rigid understandings and definitions of social actors and the social world in which they live (Butler 1993, 2004; Gamson 1995; Seidman 1994). This belief is especially applicable to sexual and gender identities. Many respondents describe shifts in their understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality once they have been exposed to alternative forms of gender expression (Shapiro 2007). While many respondents do describe their beliefs as more “open” and “fluid” and therefore consistent with queer understandings of sexuality or gender, I find that the narratives of many respondents dispute this claim. Butler (1993, 2004) argues that heteronormative ideologies permeate every aspect of social discourse and are ultimately impossible to escape. The fact that my respondents (who are a part of an alternative gender and sexual community) still cling to essentialist and heteronormative notions indicates that Butler’s assertions may be correct.

In addition to these theoretical perspectives, I use several guiding research questions in this study. First, I examine how transitioning influences the ways that transmen and partners of transmen conceptualize sex, gender, and sexuality. Next, I explore how transmen and partners of transmen both subvert and conform to

heteronormative ideologies. Finally, I focus on the affects that transitioning has on both transmen and partners of transmen within the context of an intimate relationship. These guiding questions provided me with the means to form the three data chapters within this thesis.

The Following Chapters

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 is the literature review, in which I provide a background on gender and sex. In addition, I discuss the existing social scientific research on the transgender community. In Chapter 3, I describe the qualitative methods used for this research as well as the procedures used for data collection and analysis. In Chapter 4, I detail how transitioning caused shifts in my respondents' conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality. Although they indicate that transitioning leads them to think of sex, gender, and sexuality as being fluid and multidirectional, their narratives also reveal that transmen and their partners are highly influenced by essentialist and heteronormative ideologies. In Chapter 5, I describe how gender shapes the meanings assigned to social interactions. I argue that the experiences of transmen make the significance of gender apparent because transmen have lived *as women* and *as men*. In Chapter 6, I discuss the various forms of loss that transmen and partners of transmen experience as a direct result of the transition process. As transmen physically alter their bodies and begin "passing"³ in public, both they and their partners lose the visibility they once had within the queer community. Furthermore, their partners and former partners describe the emotional consequences of being in a relationship with

³ Transpersons "pass" when others perceive them as being a part of a sex/gender category that is consistent with their gender identity. In the cases of FtM transpersons, this is when others read them as men.

someone who changes their physical bodies, often in a way that is inconsistent with the sexual desires of their partners. Finally, in Chapter 7, I provide further discussion of my findings and their limitations. In addition, I suggest possible avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to begin understanding the lives and experiences of transpersons, it is necessary to make sense of the social world in which they live. Specifically, researchers must look at the organization of society and identify the social position that transpersons occupy within the larger social world. A description of the existing gender and sexual systems that currently dominate Western culture is necessary to make sense of the transgender experience. Throughout this section, I describe dominant ideologies regarding gender, sex, and sexuality. I explain how these ideas shape the social world in which we live and how those ideas in turn influence the lives of transpersons. Furthermore, I describe how transpersons negotiate their identities, bodies, and social positions within our gendered world.

Gender

The organization of the social world revolves around a variety of ideologies and principles. Of these, gender is one of the most significant “organizing principles of the social world: it organizes our identities and self-concepts, structures our interactions, and is one basis upon which power and resources are allocated” (Wharton 2005:9). Because gender is both ubiquitous and influential in shaping power relations in society, feminists and social scientists seek to understand how gender plays a role in our daily lives. Gender is an institution that embeds itself in all aspects of social life and organization (Lorber 1994); it is a system of inequality which organizes itself around supposed differences between the male and female sexes (Lorber 1994; Wharton 2005); and it is a “routine,

methodical, and recurring accomplishment” (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). Gender permeates social life at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman 2004; Wharton 2005), and gender works as a means to create, maintain, and reproduce inequalities in our society (Lorber 1994; Risman 2004; Schwalbe 2008; Stacey and Thorne 1985; West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987; Wharton 2005).

Gender and Sex

To make sense of gender, I first describe its relationship to sex. Currently, essentialist ideologies serve as the foundation for dominant notions of gender and sex. The essentialist perspective argues that sex and sexuality are biological and that we should understand gender and sexual identities as the “cognitive realization of genuine, underlying differences” (Epstein 1987:11). In other words, the terms that we use to denote sex, gender, and sexuality are simply a reflection of the supposedly real and biological differences with which individuals are born. These essentialist beliefs further shape our heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Heteronormativity refers to the “ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” (Kitzinger 2005:2) where there are only two genders determined by corresponding biological sex category (Rich 1980). Heteronormative beliefs also purport that opposite sex/gender attraction is the only “normal” or “natural” form of sexual attraction for human beings (Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Both essentialism and heteronormativity rely on the concept of presumed innate differences between men and women. We use these supposed differences to organize society on the basis of sex differentiation.

The process of using sex differentiation to categorize human bodies begins at birth. Individuals receive a “male” or “female” designation depending on whether or not they possess “male” or “female” hormones, chromosomes, and reproductive capabilities (Hubbard 1996; Fausto-Sterling 2000). Schwalbe (2008:44) explains that “when infants are born, they are inspected and assigned to a sex category: male or female.” Whether or not medical personnel designate a child male or female is primarily dependent on their genitalia. However, in the cases of ambiguous genitalia or intersexuality,⁴ medical professionals may analyze an infant’s hormones and chromosomes. Infants with penises and XY chromosomes thus become “male” and those with vaginas and XX chromosomes become “female.” If a child does not fit nicely into this binary, doctors and medical professionals in the U.S. will surgically modify the child’s body and use hormonal treatments so that its body fits better into the male-female binary (Butler 2004; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Hubbard 1996; Lorber and Moore 2007; Wharton 2005). Because essentialist and heteronormative ideologies guide our understanding of human bodies and expectations, children automatically receive a gender designation (supported through socialization rituals) along with their sex category designation.

This essentialist focus on sex differentiation is problematic (Lorber 1994; Risman 2004; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Wharton 2005) because it creates the illusion that there are fundamental differences between men and women other than their reproductive capabilities. These presumed differences serve to justify sexual stratification and gender inequality (Lorber 1994; Wharton 2005). Through this process of stratification, we use

⁴ Intersexuals are individuals born with genitalia, hormones, or chromosomes that diverge from the male-female sex dichotomy (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

essentialist ideologies to inform how we assign value to men and women. The result is that we view men as “superior” and women as “inferior.” By positioning women as an inferior group, men as a group are able to dominate various social and cultural realms like legal, political, and religious institutions. This arrangement creates inequalities between men and women in that women lack access to resources that would enable them to perform at the same level as men (Risman 2004). Instead, women become reliant on men for those resources. Those women who do challenge male privilege risk social ostracism (Risman 2004; West and Zimmerman 1987). To avoid this, women may choose to accept their subordinate status in exchange for economic benefits (Risman 2004). By doing so they ensure that the dominant gender structure will continue to go unquestioned.

Doing Gender, Doing Difference

The gendered organization of society relies on the ability of men and women to “do gender” appropriately (West and Zimmerman 1987). According to West and Zimmerman (1987), gender is something that we accomplish. Rather than thinking of gender as merely a trait that one possesses, they argue that it is something that we *do* in our routine, everyday actions and interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987). A woman who accepts her subordinate status, for instance, is doing gender because prevailing heteronormative ideologies purport that women are both different from and inferior to men. As long as women continue to do their gender in a way that places them as inferior, weaker, and less intelligent than men, men can retain their dominant status. West and Zimmerman (1987:146) assert that by doing gender, men “do dominance” and women “do deference.” Doing gender also involves doing difference (West and Fenstermaker

1995). In other words, they do gender in a way that presumes that there are inherent differences between men and women. As men and women take on these differences, they maintain, recreate, and legitimize existing institutional arrangements that place men over women (West and Fenstermaker 1995). The ways we do gender and difference, then, reproduce prevailing structures of gender inequality.

Women are not blind to these inequalities, but many continue to do gender and difference, thereby contributing to their own subordination. Schwalbe (2008) explains that some individuals will continue to participate in this process because they maintain certain privileges and benefits from doing so. Schwalbe (2008) identifies both *side bets* and *identity stakes* as justifications by individuals for reproducing inequalities. Side bets are the secondary benefits that one receives for acting in a particular way. Identity stakes are “the side bets that ride on being able to convince others that we are who and what we claim to be” (Schwalbe 2008:116). In other words, people often receive approval for displaying that they are a particular kind of person. If a person is unsuccessful in convincing others of their identity, they could potentially lose the benefits that coincide with that identity.

Proving one’s heterosexual identity is often highly influential in maintaining a positive social position and the side bets that accompany it. According to Rich (1980), we view heterosexuality as the only “natural” and acceptable sexual identity. We further stigmatize alternative forms of sexuality so that individuals who choose those options risk their well being and safety (Butler 1993, 2004; Rich 1980). In order to avoid social sanctions and stigma, individuals must appear as “normal” heterosexual men and women.

Much is at stake, then, for individuals to portray an appropriate form of heterosexuality to others. If an individual fails to do heterosexuality in a way that is consistent with dominant expectations, they risk facing discrimination as well as losing side bets that typically accompany a heterosexual identity (Froyum 2007). Some examples of side bets that heterosexuals receive are the ability to express their sexuality openly in public, the ability to marry their partners and receive legal recognition from all state and federal governments, and the right to adopt children in all states and countries. Because our culture emphasizes the importance of family and marriage, these are highly valued identity stakes.

This example displays, then, how gender works at all levels of society. In the example of heterosexual identity stakes, we can see how the “doing of gender” occurs when individuals interact with others so that they can maintain privileges that social institutions support. Religious and legal institutions, for instance, retain authority in determining who a person can marry or whether or not they can adopt. Therefore, if an individual wishes to marry or adopt, depending on where they live, they may have to maintain a heteronormative heterosexual identity. To do this, individuals interact with others in a way that reflects a heterosexual identity as well as traditional femininity or masculinity. However, gender and sexual identities are not always mere performances. As we learn our gendered behavior and the expectations that accompany it, we often come to feel that our gender and sexual identities are an essential part of who we are (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010). Ultimately, gender shapes how we perceive ourselves, how we view and interact with others, and how others react towards us.

Transgender

The presumed naturalness of the heteronormative-informed gender structure comes under question when we recognize the existence of individuals and groups who do not fit within dominant gender and sex binaries. Among these are intersexuals, transpersons, and other non-conformists. Again, intersexuals are persons who are born with genitalia, hormones, or chromosomes that diverge from the heteronormative-informed male-female sex dichotomy. Transpersons are persons who “present alternatively gendered selves within a social system that proclaims males to be men and females to be women” (Gagne and Tewksbury 1999:59). More specifically, transpersons typically choose to embrace and enact a gender that does not correspond with their designated sex category. I refer to non-conformists as any person who chooses to live their life in a way that rejects dominant notions of sex, gender, or sexuality. Several scholars argue that the very existence of groups such as these create the opportunity to disrupt the existing heteronormative gender binary (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007; Namaste 1996; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). However, the existence of these groups has not yet made a significant change in how our society views sex and gender. In the following sections, I focus on the experiences of transpersons and how they both conform to and resist heteronormativity.

Transgender individuals have a unique position within our gendered world in that they challenge dominant gender ideologies. Transpersons often feel discomfort with their bodies and the gendered expectations that coincide with those bodies. This discomfort can lead to the rejection of their designated sex and gender categories, and in some cases,

their physical bodies. The result is a person that may appear as a gender that is inconsistent with their assigned corresponding and heteronormative-informed sex category. Recall that heteronormativity is the notion that two and only two genders exist; these genders exist as a reflection of their corresponding and natural biological sex; and “normal” attraction exists only for individuals of the opposite sex/gender category (Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Because transpersons live in ways that are inconsistent with heteronormative notions of sex and gender, they are often referred to as living on the boundaries or on the “outside” of our existing gender system (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007).

Perceived sex and gender categories influence everyday interactions.

Transpersons uniquely have had the choice and the chance to live as both genders or live as an ambiguously gendered person. How a transperson goes about living in such a way often depends on their financial capacities. Those that are able to afford hormonal and surgical treatment are more easily able to *transition*. Again, transitioning occurs when a transperson begins to change their body and physical appearance in order to look as if they are of a different sex/gender category. This change may involve the use of hormonal treatment or surgical procedures. However, some individuals will only alter their dress, hair, voice, speaking patterns and behaviors. Those that lack the financial capacity to transition often use these less expensive methods to alter their appearances in ways that cause them to appear “differently gendered.” Regardless of whether or not one is able to or wants to transition, simply presenting oneself as differently gendered leads to living on the boundaries of our dichotomous sex and gender systems.

The transitioning process is highly influential in shaping the social interactions engaged in by transpersons (Dozier 2005; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). Similarly, an individual's perceived sex rather than biological sex is significant in shaping daily interactions (Dozier 2005; Green 2005; Lucal 1999). While gender is a somewhat arbitrary system in that it is based on the performance of some presumed underlying physical "truth," which is socially constructed within patriarchal definitions of masculinity and femininity related to the time period, region, and overall culture, it remains significant in shaping our daily interactions, behaviors and perceptions of one another (West and Zimmerman 1987). Additionally, while many scholars are in agreement that gender is socially constructed (Dozier 2005; Green 2005; Hubbard 1996; Lorber and Moore 2007; Lucal 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987), the consequences of the embodiment of gender are very real (Dozier 2005; Lucal 1999; Pascoe 2007).

The position that transpersons possess provides the possibility of transgression and resistance against the existing gender system (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In other words, since the social location of transpersons is on the "outside" and in opposition to dominant forms of gender and sexuality, they have the unique potential to disrupt that system. Our notions of sex, gender, and sexuality are informed by heteronormativity. The very existence of individuals who contradict heteronormative notions disrupts the existing system. Therefore, if our heteronormative beliefs are correct, such individuals should not exist. Because they do exist, there must be a problem with our belief system.

Despite this obvious contradiction to our beliefs regarding sex, gender and sexuality, heteronormative discourses and actions prevail. Lorber and Moore (2007) argue that because transpersons have a tendency to conform their bodies and behaviors to the expectations of the dominant gender system, it remains intact. Moreover, when transpersons transition from one gender to its “opposite,” they tend to comply with dominant ideologies which assert that there are only two viable gender options. Therefore, the ability of transpersons to disrupt our gender system revolves around the issue of visibility (Green 2005; Lorber and Moore 2007; Lucal 1999). Specifically, do they blend into society as “normally” gendered beings or are they visible as gender non-conformists?

Visibility

Scholars often address the issue of visibility when discussing transsexuality and transgenderism (Dozier 2005; Green 1999, 2005; Schilt 2006; Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Becoming visible can mean different things for different individuals. Some transpersons wish to be visible as a gender/sex “opposite” from that which they were assigned with at birth while others wish to be recognized as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer⁵ (Green 2005). When others perceive them as being a part of a sex/gender category different from their birth designation, transpersons “pass.” Scholars often criticize those transpersons who successfully “pass” as another gender because they blend into the existing heteronormative system and therefore reinforce it (Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). However, not all transpersons

⁵ Typically referred to as LGBTQ. For the remainder of this paper, I use the acronym “LGBTQA” when referring to this community.

wish to pass as another gender. Many wish to remain visible as transgender, queer, or something else. Some FtM transpersons fear that being visible men will cause them to lose access to women's space and strong female-centered communities (Green 2005) while others fear they will lose legitimacy to remain within the queer community (Dozier 2005). Rather than appear as butch lesbians, some transmen "read"⁶ as heterosexual men and therefore feel as if they no longer belong within the LGBTQA community.

Visibility depends on how others perceive transpersons: "the perceived sex of individuals, whether biological or not, influences the meaning assigned to behavior and the tenor of social and sexual interaction" (Dozier 2005: 304). The perceptions of others are highly influential in shaping social interactions, and the experiences of FtM transpersons are related to whether or not they pass as men (Dozier 2005; Schilt 2006). Furthermore, transmen often find that they experience an increase in status and prestige when recognized by others as male (Dozier 2005; Green 2005; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). These findings are indicative of the power relationship between men and women within our gendered society.

Simply "looking like" a different gender is often all one needs in order to be perceived as a member of that gender (Dozier 2005; Green 2005; Lucal 1999). Most people maintain the view that "the body is the marker of gender and that gender and sexuality are dictated by the genitalia" (Green 2005:295). Despite this, secondary sex characteristics often serve as primary indicators of one's sex and gender category (Dozier 2005). In an analysis of FtM transpersons, Dozier (2005:304) contends that "a penis or

⁶ To "read" someone via gender presentation is to perceive an individual as being either a male or female (sex), and as either a man or a woman (gender).

breasts are not as crucial to the perception of sex as their meanings created in both social and sexual interaction.” An individual can pass as a specific gender simply because s/he possesses what are considered male or female sex characteristics, and s/he adheres to socially constructed gender norms. For FtM transpersons, having a physically male body is less necessary than appearing “like a man” (Green 2005). Respondents in Green’s (2005) group interviews explain that they only needed to look and act like a particular gender in order to acquire the social status associated with that gender.

Transpersons are not the only persons who transgress gender norms by presenting themselves in ways that are inconsistent with heteronormative notions of gender and sex. In describing her own experiences as an individual who does not conform to the dichotomous gender binary, Lucal (1999) asserts that other people will always “do gender” for you whether or not you want them to do so (West and Zimmerman 1987). Lucal (1999), a biological female who resists “doing femininity” but nonetheless still identifies as a woman, explains that she reads differently in various social situations. Sometimes people read her as a man and other times as a woman. How others interact with her depends on which secondary sex characteristics they identify as well as how they read her gender presentation.

Transmen in the Workplace

Studying the changes that occur over the transitioning process can enlighten us to how perceived gender influences the amount of power, resources, and respect allocated to individuals. Schilt (2006) and Schilt and Westbrook (2009) studied the shifts that occurred in the interactions experienced by FtM transpersons as they transitioned on the

job. These studies are significant because they follow the same individuals over the course of their transition. Thus, there is no change in education, social class, or social capital. Each person remains the same in terms of these statuses, except that other people perceive their gender differently because of changes in their external gendered appearance (and perhaps mannerisms). Based on how others read their gender presentation, they experience different treatment and have different expectations.

Schilt (2006) also found a race and sexual orientation dynamic in the power allocation to transmen when she discovered that Black FtM transmen experienced a transition in how others perceived them. The Black respondent went from being perceived as a loud Black woman to an angry and intimidating Black man. Schilt (2006) also found that the amount of respect and recognition allotted to transmen depended on how well they performed their gender. To successfully perform masculinity, transmen must perform as heterosexual men. If others perceive them as “feminine” men, they are often labeled as gay, which leads to discrimination and harassment.

In a similar study, Schilt and Westbrook (2009) focus on the sexual dynamic of the transition process in the workplace. Through interviewing transmen and their coworkers, they gained a better understanding of how transitioning affects coworker views of gender and sexuality. They found that both men and women coworkers accept transmen as men. However, when situations or conversations become sexualized, women coworkers reject transmen as men and instead perceive them as lesbians seeking to trick women into homosexual sexual encounters. Men coworkers retain their view of transmen

as heterosexual men and even encourage sexual banter to show that they are “just one of the guys.”

Such findings lead to the questioning of assertions that transpersons have the ability to disrupt heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality. The very existence of transpersons points to the inadequacies of our current heteronormative-informed beliefs, and the illegitimacy of those discourses (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007). Scholars assert that it is possible to use these illegitimacies as justifications for dismantling existing ideas of gender, sex, and sexuality (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007). Despite this, even in the face of blatant contradiction to those beliefs, many individuals will use heteronormative-informed ideas to further reinforce existing ideologies rather than challenge them. Simply pointing to examples that contradict the norm may not be sufficient in creating any type of change in how we conceptualize gender and sexuality.

The stigmatized status of “outsider” causes some of those “on the inside” to disregard the contradiction that gender transgressors represent. While transgressors may represent faults within the existing gender system, their deviant status leads many “gender normals” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009) to cling to their ideas and identities rather than reflect upon them. The very existence of transgressors is most likely terrifying to those who live within the binary because it completely changes how they perceive the world and their place within it. By clinging to dominant ideologies and rejecting those that contradict those ideas, individuals can remain safe in that they can continue to live as they always have.

Trans-Identity

Through socialization, we come to recognize and identify ourselves with a particular gender group (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010). Over the course of our lives, the socialization we go through shapes our sense of self and the identities we express (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010). From the moment we are born, we learn how to present ourselves and behave in a gendered way that is consistent with our biological sex (Lorber 1994; Lorber and Moore 2007; Schwalbe 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987; Wharton 2005). This training is reflective of the heteronormative standards that exist within Western culture whereby those born male learn to be men and those born female learn to be women. Transpersons go through this same form of socialization. However, the case of transpersons is different in that they resist the gender identity they originally learn and in turn, take on a new gender identity. Thus, transpersons relearn certain gender appropriate behavior, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

Ultimately, as transpersons relearn and begin living out their new gender identity, they must negotiate their past and present selves: "Negotiating one's past self with one's present self can be challenging" (Stalp 2006:200). To accommodate such a challenge, transpersons use a variety of methods and tools that aid them in constructing their new sense of self and moving past their old sense of self. Transpersons negotiate these often conflicting selves through embodiment (Rubin 2003; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005), support or friendship groups (Mason-Schrock 1996; Shapiro 2007), relationships with family and children (Hines 2006), and by using existing forms of knowledge to shape and

create their new selves (Devor 1997; Gagne and Tewksbury 1999; Mason-Schrock 1996; Schrock and Reid 2006; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005).

The Role of Knowledge in Shaping Trans-Identity

One of the primary ways that transpersons learn who they are is through already existing knowledge (Gagne and Tewksbury 1999). Transpersons will sometimes associate with identity categories such as gay, lesbian, or crossdresser, until they learn new identity categories that better fit their sense of who they are. As transpersons acquire new knowledge, they begin to reshape how they think about themselves and their place within the gendered world (Devor 1997; Gagne and Tewksbury 1999). According to Gagne and Tewksbury (1999), many MtF transwomen first find a sense of belonging with gay and crossdressing communities. As these transwomen experience exposure to different forms of knowledge whereby new transsexual identities become known, they move away from their previous gay and crossdressing identities. Similarly, Devor (1997) finds that FtM transpersons initially joined lesbian communities because they felt as though that community best fit “who they are.” However, over time, the transmen Devor (1997) interviewed felt that there was a distinct disconnect between the identities of lesbians and themselves. As they acquire new knowledge of alternative ways of being (FTM identities), they come to realize that the term “lesbian” does not accurately describe who they believe themselves to be. In other words, now that they are aware of trans-identities, they feel that they finally understand who they truly are.

Hegemonic discourses on gender, sex, and sexuality are highly significant in shaping how transpersons see themselves (Gagne and Tewksbury 1999). An important

relationship exists between power and available forms of knowledge (Foucault 1990; Gagne and Tewksbury 1999) where those in power create and sustain forms of knowledge that reflect their own beliefs and needs (Schwalbe 2008). In looking at how transpersons think about themselves and their place within the gendered world, we can see the influence of heteronormative beliefs. In trying to understand who they are, many transpersons use traditional or essentialist notions to *prove* their transsexual identities. For example, Mason-Schrock (1996) and Schrock and Reid (2006) find that MtF transsexuals point to supposed “feminine” childhood behavior as proof of their inner feminine self. Their respondents explained that because they were never good at sports or that they liked to play dress-up, they have always truly been girls. These stories reflect dominant beliefs of gender which purport that specific behavior “matches” a specific gender. In this case, because the respondents did not like to do masculine things and instead preferred feminine activities, they must *really* be women. Such arguments reinforce the notion that “real women” and “real men” do not engage in supposedly cross-gender activities.

Even when faced with contradictory gendered behavior, respondents disregard those behaviors by explaining that the transperson was in denial at the time (Mason-Schrock 1996). Therefore, a MtF transperson who was successful at sports or was sexually promiscuous with women as a male-bodied person was attempting to deny their “true self” by overcompensating with highly masculine behavior. Again, this tendency to connect gendered behavior with a hidden gendered self reflects dominant notions of traditional masculinity and femininity.

What is interesting is that transpersons can simultaneously reject and reinforce heteronormative-informed discourses (Lorber and Moore 2007; Mason-Schrock 1996; Schrock and Reid 2006). As transsexuals adjust to their new identity, they may find themselves justifying their past sexual behavior in a way that coincides with their current gender identity. The ways they do so often simultaneously deviate from *and* conform to heteronormative notions of sex and gender. For example, Schrock and Reid (2006) find that MtF transsexuals subvert the notion that the make-up of bodies define the type of sexual intercourse taking place. Instead, they assert that the “true self,” or true gender of the individual determines sexual identity and defines the nature of their sexual activity.

In their sexual histories, respondents engaged in sexual intercourse with men or women as male-bodied individuals. However, they define the sexual intercourse that they had in terms of their internalized gender (Schrock and Reid 2006). MtF transpersons use their gender identity to label the sex as “homosexual” or “heterosexual.” Thus, when they had sex with women (a combination of male and female bodies *at the time*), they identified that sex as lesbian. On the other hand, when they had sex with men (a combination of male and male bodies), they described the sex as heterosexual. They use these designations because they believe that at the time of those sexual interactions, they were in fact women and not men, despite their physically male bodies.

These respondents reject dominant gendered ideologies in that they dispute the idea that (sexed) bodies determine sexual identity. They also reject the notion that specific types of bodies have a corresponding gender. However, at the same time, they conform to the notion that internal genders should match a specific body. Therefore,

while they may disagree with the idea that one's body matches up with a particular gender identity, they are in agreement that physical bodies and genders *should* match. As transpersons change their bodies to reflect this inner "true self," they reinforce and reflect heteronormative standards.

Embodying a New Gender

As transpersons begin to shape their bodies and appearances in ways that coincide with their internal gender, they often experience ambiguous feelings (Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). Because transpersons must learn how to act, look, and think like a gender that is different from the one they've previously learned, they may initially experience feelings of inauthenticity (Mason-Schrock 1996; Rubin 2003; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). These feelings stem from the conflict between the transperson's old and new gender identities. Throughout their entire life, they are socialized to act and think a specific way ("like a man" or "like a woman"): "From birth, parents socialize boys and girls into separate gender roles through differences in touch, talk, emotional response, play activities, and toy and book choices" (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010:88). Because our society trains men and women differently, the process of taking on a new or different gender identity may feel "unnatural." Many transpersons find that over time, their new appropriated behaviors and feelings come to feel "natural" (Rubin 2003; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). The fact that gender identity begins to feel "natural" through appropriation and repetition points to the highly constructed nature of gender identity (Butler 1993).

Individuals go through status passages when they move from one status to another (Strauss 1959). Status passages typically occur throughout individuals' lives as they grow up. Some examples are when people transition from child to adult, from girl to woman, or student to graduate (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010). I contend that transpersons also go through a status passage when they transition from their previous gender expression to their new gender expression. As individuals move from one status to another, they must learn how to be a new person. As transpersons move from man-to-woman or woman-to-man, they must relearn their appropriate gender behavior. They must take on their new identity and learn how to be that new person.

Support Groups

Friends, families, and support groups often play a role in aiding transpersons to take on their new identities (Hines 2006; Mason-Schrock 1996; Shapiro 2007). Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine (2010) explain that friendship groups help us by providing us with knowledge and giving us a place to try on new identities. Such groups can "serve as staging areas for socialization and self-development" (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010:91). In her research on a travelling drag-king troupe, Disposable Boy Toys (DBT), Shapiro (2007) finds this to be the case. Individuals who join DBT discover that participation in the group leads to a shift in their own gender identities. DBT provides members a safe place to try on new identities and to play with gender. Through performing new gender identities and learning about alternative forms of gender, members are likely to change how they think about gender as a whole as well as how they perceive their own gender.

Likewise, transsexual support groups provide transpersons with a safe place to learn about themselves and to try on new identities (Mason-Schrock 1996). Through participation in support groups, MtF transsexuals find solace in knowing that there are others who are both “like them” and who support their decision to express a differently gendered self. Support groups are also helpful in aiding in transsexual development because they provide new forms of knowledge and can shed light on members’ past selves in order to make sense of their gender identity (Mason-Schrock 1996). However, as indicated before, sometimes this new knowledge or interpretation of transgender identity reinforces heteronormativity.

Transpersons can also find comfort and support from their families and partners. Hines (2006) discovers that one of the most significant forms of support comes from transpersons’ partners and children. Those transpersons who have strong bonds and close communication with their children and spouses prior to transitioning find that their relationships remain stronger and last longer than transpersons who lack such relationships. Transpersons who are fortunate enough to maintain close relationships with their children and partners receive emotional support throughout the transition process. Pfeffer (2009, 2010) explains that women partners of transmen report performing more household work and emotion work than their trans-partners. Such findings are consistent with standards for “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) as women partners within a patriarchal system (Pfeffer 2010). These forms of support from family, children, and intimate partners can help transpersons adjust to their new gender identity.

Transpersons may enjoy various forms of support which aid them in moving past their previous gender identity and taking on their new identity. However, previous research indicates that many of these methods serve to reinforce the existing gender and sexual binaries rather than subvert them. One of the purposes of my research is to explore how transmen and partners of transmen receive and resist gender socialization. Of primary concern is how transmen and partners of transmen take on and recreate new or existing identities. This information can shed light on how dominant gender and sexual ideologies are malleable. It can also help us to challenge heteronormative discourses. As it stands, we organize our society on the basis of gender in a way that benefits some and harms others (Lorber 1994; Lorber and Moore 2007; Risman 2004; West and Zimmerman 1987; Wharton 2005). As researchers gain knowledge of the successful resistances, we can move forward with replacing existing oppressive structures with those that are more equitable and just.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS & DATA

One of the main purposes of social science research is to learn about human life and experiences. Through our research, we attempt to gain an understanding about the lives and interactions of different groups. Transpersons exist as a marginalized group in American society who are often the victims of verbal, emotional, and physical violence (Butler 2004; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Groups who are misunderstood, underrepresented, and discriminated against deserve the opportunity to provide information about themselves with the hope of encouraging understanding and equal treatment. By leaving transpersons out of the research and FtM transpersons out of transgender research, social scientists encourage the further oppression and mistreatment of this particular group. The experiences of transpersons, specifically those of FtM transpersons, deserve equal representation in the research literature.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methodology is the best approach to gaining a better understanding of how the transition process affects the relationships and identities of FtM transpersons and partners of FtM transpersons. Researchers often use qualitative methods to learn “how groups and individuals define situations and give meaning to their experiences and surroundings” (Warren and Karner 2005:x). Qualitative methods are also appropriate for unexplored topics, which as I mentioned earlier, is somewhat the case for this topic. While research on the transgender population is increasing, the majority of research focuses primarily on the lives and experiences of MtF transsexuals (Cromwell 1999;

Dozier 2005; Green 2005). At face value, the tendency to center research on MtFs suggests that the experiences of biological males are more significant to social scientific researchers in the United States. Some scholars explain that the discipline of sociology has faced criticism for ignoring women in research since the second wave U.S. women's movement, which began in the 1960s (Stacey and Thorne 1985; Wharton 2005). According to Wharton (2005:5), "Women were rarely the subjects of research." This trend carries over to transgender research in that biological women are less likely to be research subjects than are biological men. While such a pattern is problematic in that it ignores and devalues the position of biological females, it is consistent with the norms, values, and practices of a patriarchal society.

If we look at the history of transgender research, we see that those in psychological and medical fields use the findings on MtF subjects to explain the experiences of FtM transsexuals (Cromwell 1999). Such an approach leads to overgeneralization. This occurs when we take conclusions for a specific group of individuals and apply them to *all* persons within that group (Wharton 2005). Mohanty (2000) offers an example of this being problematic when she describes how Western feminist discourses often present "third world women" as a homogenous group of women who are victims, sexually oppressed, ignorant, and traditional. We cannot assume that the lives of these women are similar simply because they live in developing nations (Mohanty 2000). This kind of view limits us from gaining an understanding of the political, social, ideological, and historical diversity that exists within these communities.

We cannot take research about one particular group of transsexuals as being factual for *all* transsexuals. Because I want to learn about the lived experiences of FtM transpersons and partners of FtM transpersons, I must allow them to speak for themselves. Sprague (2005:120) contends that “listening to people who are members of groups that have been underrepresented in conventional research provides rich opportunities to discover what scholarly discourse may have obscured, and to see the limits of prevailing ‘truths.’” While my findings will provide insight into the lives and experiences of FtM transpersons, they do not encompass the diversity that exists within the trans-community.

Brief Description of Research

In this project, I conducted ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore how FtM transpersons and partners of FtMs experience and interpret the transition process within the context of intimate relationships. First, I describe my role as a researcher and how my status as an insider shaped my interactions with research participants. Next, I detail my target population and the requirements for participation. After detailing recruitment and interviewing procedures, I discuss the grounded theory methods that I use in data collection and analysis. I then summarize how I coded and analyzed the data, which resulted in the three data chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). I subsequently provide demographic information about my ten respondents. Finally, I explain what to expect in the following data and discussion chapters.

My Role as a Researcher

Collins (2000) argues that researchers should indicate what their standpoint is with respect to the topic of study. I am a partner of a FtM-identifying transperson. Therefore, I possess an insider status in relation to my respondents who are also partners of transmen. At the same time, I am also an outsider in that I do not identify as transgender. In a sense, I am both an insider *and* an outsider to my respondents. Several researchers discuss the implications of being an insider when conducting qualitative research (Baca Zinn 1979; Beoku-Betts 1994; Lofland et al. 2006; Oakley 1981). While being an insider benefited me in that it encouraged trust and rapport with participants (Baca Zinn 1979; Beoku-Betts, Oakley 1981), it also created various problems. Baca Zinn (1979) explains that some scholars oppose “insider research” because the researcher is bound to be limited by their biases. On the other hand, she argues that while insiders may possess certain biases, *all* researchers are biased in some way or another. She further explains that if anything, an insider status could benefit researchers because they can better empathize with the experiences of research subjects and they will have insights that are more specific to the research population. I agree with this assertion and I fully believe that my status as a “partial” insider was beneficial in that it helped to build rapport with research participants that learned of my insider status.

During interviews, my status as a partner of a transman came up often, but not in all interviews. Therefore, not all research participants learned of my insider status. I chose to disclose my own position only when I felt that it was relevant. I did not recognize any difference between those respondents that knew my status and those who

did not with respect to the type or amount of information that they chose to share with me. However, through the interviews, it became apparent that the majority of respondents believed me to be “a part of the community” simply based on the fact that I was conducting this particular research project. I believe that this presumed shared sense of community and life experience enabled me to build rapport with my respondents.

While being an insider can be beneficial, it can also create problems in that research subjects may make assumptions about the researcher because of their insider status (Oakley 1981). Specifically, because I know what it is like to be in a relationship with a FtM transperson, those participants that knew of my insider status automatically assumed that I understood what their experiences are like and what they went through. This type of thinking sometimes deterred participants from fully describing their experiences and, thus, required me to dig deeper for more information. In the few cases where participants made assumptions about my knowledge, I gently probed them to describe what *their* experiences were like. This strategy took the focus away from me and redirected it back to the participants and their own accounts.

Another potential problem of being an insider is that participants may have chosen to describe themselves and their beliefs in a way that they thought would reflect favorably on them. For example, respondents may have described themselves as being more progressive in their understanding or practices than they actually are in real life. Because my research is based solely on participant accounts and narratives, I have no way to actually prove that respondents actually engage in behaviors they describe. This is certainly a limitation of my study. However, through participant narratives, I was able to

determine that there are discrepancies in how these study respondents talk about themselves and how they describe their behaviors and beliefs, as becomes apparent in the following data chapters.

Additionally, as an insider, some participants expected me to use my research in a way that will benefit the trans-community which is marginalized within the larger society (Baca Zinn 1979; Oakley 1981). I believe that by engaging in this research, I am extending the limited knowledge that exists about the trans-community. In addition to such knowledge, I can enhance current understanding and thereby benefit the trans-community. However, some of my findings may not be received favorably within the trans-community. For instance, I argue that both FtM transpersons and partners of FtMs display beliefs and behavior that is consistent with heteronormative ideologies. While my findings may contradict how members of the trans-community perceive themselves, I still believe that this research project will benefit the trans-community. The fact that the trans-community remains influenced by heteronormative and often essentialist beliefs further proves that such beliefs are incredibly pervasive. Butler (2004) argues that escaping prevailing heteronormative discourses and influences may be impossible. This study points to the legitimacy of Butler's argument.

Participant Requirements

Individuals serve as the units of analysis in this project. In order to be eligible for this study, participants must have met three qualifications. First, all participants needed to be at least 18 years of age or older at the time of the interview. Second, participants were currently or previously in a relationship where one partner identified as being a female-

to-male transperson. No specific “level” of transitioning was necessary to participate in the study. In other words, individuals identifying as FtM transpersons simply needed to claim this identity. I did not require trans-identified partners to have undergone any hormonal treatments or surgical procedures to be involved in this study.

I included both single and partnered persons in this study. I chose to interview both types of individuals so that I could potentially account for differences between the two groups. It is possible, for instance, that former partners of FtM transpersons were unable to maintain a relationship with someone who had chosen to transition. While I did not find any major differences between the two groups with respect to their reactions to the transition process, limiting the study to just one of these groups would have prevented me from learning this information. Ultimately, leaving former partners out of the study would have been a mistake.

The last requirement for participation was that couples and former couples had gone through disclosure *after* they began dating. Disclosure refers to when the FtM transperson makes their trans-identity known to their partner. I selected this requirement because I am interested in how partners of FtM transpersons manage their own sexual and gender identities when confronted with a partner who seeks to change their body in a way that challenges the non-transperson’s sexual identity. If disclosure occurs prior to entering a relationship, each partner has the opportunity to decide whether or not they are willing to be involved in such a relationship. Many individuals are open to dating a transperson from the start of a relationship. My focus here is on those partners who were

originally unaware. This situation causes partners to address the transitioning process while in an invested romantic relationship.

To keep the study more inclusive to partners of FtM transpersons, I did not require that the partners identify as a specific gender or as representing a specific sexual orientation. This approach opened the study up to partners who identified as men, women, FtM, MtF, trans, or any other type of gender or sexuality they see as relevant. Similar to keeping former partners in the study, I thought it was important to leave participation open to all gendered types of partners. In sum, I did not require partners to have a specific gender identity such as man, woman, trans, or queer. I only required them to have been in a relationship with someone who disclosed their FtM identity during the relationship. This approach promotes a more diverse sample of partners of transmen.

Recruitment Process

Upon receiving approval from my institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began recruiting potential participants using purposive snowball sampling techniques. Warren and Karner (2005:130) describe snowball sampling as the "process of accumulating interviewees from within interlocking social networks, beginning with an initial contact." Through my own personal contacts within the LGBTQA community, I was able to recruit ten members of my target population: four FtM-identified transpersons and six female-bodied partners (or former partners) of transmen. One respondent was both FtM-identified and a former partner of a FtM transperson. I counted this participant as a FtM transperson, but I also analyzed his narratives as they related to being a partner of a transman. In other words, the data collected from his interview was analyzed and

coded for patterns and trends related to being both a transman as well as a partner of a transman.

To recruit research participants, I forwarded a copy of my IRB approved consent form (Appendix A) via email to my personal contacts within the LGBTQA community. Those contacts then forwarded the consent form to individuals that they believed might be interested in participating in the study. The consent form provided my contact information which enabled potential participants to either call me by telephone or email me to set up interviews. Recruiting participants in this way helped prevent coercion in that potential respondents could choose not to respond without pressure from the researcher or initial contacts. Further, the initial contacts were unaware if potential respondents became research participants.

Upon receiving contact from potential research participants, I confirmed eligibility, determined that they had read and understood the consent form, and began setting up interviews. During the months of July and August of 2010, I conducted nine interviews over the telephone⁷ and one interview in-person. I recorded all interviews with participant approval and each interview lasted between one to two hours. I transcribed and coded all ten interviews. As is custom in qualitative research, I blinded all locations and use pseudonyms for all research participants to ensure confidentiality.

Semi-Structured In-depth Interviewing

Through ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I examine how transitioning shapes the lives and intimate relationships of FtM transpersons and partners of FtM

⁷ Telephone interviews were necessary given the various geographic locations of research participants.

transpersons. This form of interviewing provides respondents the opportunity to tell their own personal stories. By hearing multiple voices and interests, we can begin to examine the fluidity of gender and sexual identities so that diversity, rather than conformity, can reign (Seidman 1994). In-depth interviews are also ideal for talking with FtM transpersons and partners (or former partners) of transmen because I “want to find out how other people have thought or felt about, or handled, some issue or problem” (Warren and Karner 2005:118). By interviewing participants I can better engage in an open dialogue about the transition process, the effects it has on intimate relationships, and its influences on the gender and sexual identities of both partners. Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland (2006:15) point out that this type of interaction is one of the best ways to achieve “intimate familiarity with the actions and orientations of other human beings.”

For my interviews, I used an interview guide with open-ended questions during the data collection process (See Appendices B and C). This helped initiate rather than restrict dialogue with participants. By using general topics and open-ended questions, I provided participants the chance to speak freely about their experiences. Additionally, when I was through asking my own questions, I asked participants, “What else can you tell me that I haven’t already asked?” (Stalp 2007). This approach opened up dialogue between myself and research subjects and prevented me from restricting where the data could go. Thus, the participants themselves, rather than the researcher, guided the flow of the conversation. As a researcher, it is my role to keep the interview on track and the dialogue flowing. Therefore, when participants tended to veer off-topic, I used the guiding questions and topics to bring the interview back on track.

Description of Participants

While my research participants are somewhat uniform with respect to race and education (most are white and highly educated), they are quite diverse with respect to their age (which ranges from 25-53 years), gender identity, sexual orientation, and stage within the transition process. This information is necessary to know in order to provide the context for which each of their narratives can be understood. To shed light on the lives of my ten respondents, I provide a table (See Table I) which details the basic demographic information of participants. In addition, I include short biographies that discuss how participants identify and where the FtM trans-identified partners were with respect to the transition process at the time the interviews took place. (This information is located in Appendix D.)

Table I: Basic Participant Information

Participant	Role in Relationship	Relationship Status	Age	Gender*	Sexual Orientation	Education	Race/ Ethnicity
Angela	Partner	Separated from first FtM partner; now coupled with new FtM partner	25	Female	Lesbian	High School; Currently working on BA	Hispanic
James	FtM	Married to Susan	53	Male/Trans-guy	Bisexual	MA	White
Karen	Partner	Married to FtM Partner	46	Female	Queer	High School; Currently working on BA	White
Liam	FtM	Married to Nicole	32	FtM	No Orientation	BA; Currently working on MA	White
Mel	Partner	Coupled with FtM Partner	31	Ciswoman	Queer	MA	White
Nicole	Partner	Married to Liam	35	Female	No Orientation	MA	White
Randi	Partner	Separated; now single	28	Gender-queer	Queer	MA; Currently working on Ph.D.	White
Susan	Partner	Married to James	42	Female-bodied	Lesbian	MA; some Ph.D.	White
Tucker	FtM	Separated; now single	38	Transguy	Queer	Ph.D.	White
Zane	FtM & Partner	Separated; now single	28	Transman	Queer	MA; Currently working on Ph.D.	White

*I identify sex designation and gender identity as two distinct categories, with sex designation representing one's physical body (male/female) and gender identity representing one's subjective sense of being a girl, boy, man, or woman (Pfeffer 2010). The above terms are the answers that respondents gave when asked to identify their "gender identity."

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory involves inductive rather than deductive research (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In using this methodological approach, I did not enter interviews with any preconceived notions about what I would find. Such an approach is ideal because it opens up the possibilities for where the research can go. If I went into interviews with a specific theoretical explanation, I would limit myself, the research process, and the data. Rather than me guiding the data, inductive research allows the data to guide me. Glaser and Strauss (1967) assert that this type of methodology is best suited to develop a theoretical framework that pertains to the data being studied. By using these methods, I increase my ability to account for patterns that emerged during the data collection and analysis processes.

Grounded theory methods require that the researcher have simultaneous involvement in the data collection and analysis processes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Through using the constant comparative method, I was able to analyze the data as I collected it, so that I could then identify what patterns and themes exist within them. Charmaz (2001:336) argues that this is ideal because it “leads the researcher subsequently to collect more data around emerging themes and questions.” Rather than overwhelming myself with gathering data that may not be of use to me, I used this technique to further focus the interviews. This early analysis aided me in ridding interviews of irrelevant topics and questions, and adding those that are fruitful (Charmaz 2001).

Coding and Data Analysis

As I conducted interviews, I began transcribing and coding the data around emerging themes, which resulted in the three data chapters I present later in this document. I used open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Warren and Karner 2005) during the initial transcription process and continued to use open coding through multiple re-readings of the interview transcripts and notes. Corbin and Strauss (2008:195), describe open coding as the process of “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data.” Open coding is the process whereby the researcher analyzes the data (interview transcripts and notes) and begins to identify important themes or concepts that emerge within the data. In using this approach, I began to label various themes or patterns that I found to be consistent or significant (Warren and Karner 2005).

In addition to using open coding, I also practiced axial coding, which is “relating concepts and categories to each other” (Corbin and Strauss 2008:195). After I had initially identified key concepts and themes within the data, I began looking for the relationships that existed between those concepts. This process enabled me to see the connections between themes so that I could compile separate documents which consisted of relevant data. I then went through those separate documents to look for additional themes, subthemes, and relationships. The emerging themes and concepts that I identified and analyzed throughout this process became the basis for the three data chapters in this study.

In Chapter 4, I describe how transitioning led to significant shifts in how respondents conceptualize sex, gender, and sexuality. While they indicated that their ideas became less restrictive and more fluid, their narratives point to the existence of highly essentialist ideologies, which shape how they think about their bodies and enact their sexual desires. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the experiences of transmen shed light on the influence of gender in shaping our day-to-day interactions. More specifically, I note how the meaning attributed to social interactions depends on the perceived gender of social actors. Finally, in Chapter 6, I explore how the transition process leads to several negative consequences for both transmen and partners of transmen in that they each lose their queer visibility and that partners of transmen sometimes experience strong feelings of loss for their once female-bodied partners.

CHAPTER 4

CONSTRUCTING CONTRADICTIONS

In this study, FtM transpersons and partners of FtMs *both resist and comply with* dichotomous understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Respondents reveal how heteronormative notions shape their conceptions of gender and sexuality. In addition, respondents come to realize through the transition process that sex, gender, and sexuality are much more “fluid” and “open” than they had originally believed. FtMs resist and comply with traditional definitions of sex, gender and sexuality in complicated ways. FtMs go to great effort to alter their gender presentation through hormone treatment and body modification while still adhering to an already existing definition of gender presentation by trying to pass as men. In this way, FtMs in this study are trading out one set of gender/sexuality regulations for another as they transition from butch lesbians to visibly masculine (and presumed straight) men.

In this chapter, I describe the influence that transitioning has on how respondents conceptualize sex, gender, and sexuality. In addition, I discuss how prevailing beliefs about what it means to be trans are shaped by heteronormative ideologies. I next describe how the transition process changes the intimate lives of female-to-male (FtM) transpersons and their partners. Ultimately, I find that as transmen transition, both they and their partners must renegotiate how they think and act in terms of appropriate sexual intimacy and interaction with trans-bodies. Furthermore, I find that being transgender or being in a relationship with someone who identifies as transgender typically provokes an

ideological shift away from rigid and dichotomous understandings and toward more fluid conceptualizations of sexuality, sex, and gender.

Changing Ideas of Gender and Sexuality

Interviewees' conceptions of gender and sexuality changed significantly as they responded to the transition process. Before the transition, both FtMs and partners of FtMs understood gender and sexuality to be "dichotomous," "linear," "rigid," and "black and white." After the transition, they described gender and sexuality as "fluid," "open," "multidirectional," or "on a spectrum." These descriptions moved away from heteronormatively-informed understandings of gender and sexuality (Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009), emphasizing that such dominant notions restrict the possibilities of the human experience (Gamson 1995; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994).

Heteronormativity shapes how we conceptualize sex, gender, and sexuality. Heteronormative beliefs purport that heterosexuality is the only appropriate form of sexuality and that only two sexes (male and female) exist, with each having a corresponding gender (Lucal 1999; Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Prior to transition, FtMs report being somewhat in line with heteronormative explanations regarding sex categories (e.g., male and female), but not with rigid sexual orientation or gender definitions, especially given respondents' sexual identities as butch lesbians.

So, while FtMs and partners were not in agreement that heterosexuality is the only correct form of sexuality, they *did* think of gender and sexual expression in dichotomous terms. As James indicates, "I realize that it is not as black and white as I used to try to

make it.” For most respondents, no valid gender or sexual expression existed “in between” or “outside” of the dominant categories. Because of such beliefs, respondents explain that prior to the transition they did not consider identities such as bisexuality or transgender as viable sexual or gender identities. Susan, a lesbian identified woman who is currently married to her FtM trans-partner, defines sexuality in this way:

Early in my coming out, it was a very dichotomous world. You were either gay or straight and bi’s were not to be trusted and trans people were, god only knows what they were. It was mostly transwomen that were identified and ridiculed in my circle and in our community. There was this all or nothing gender and all or nothing sexual orientation. Anything that was in the middle was not to be trusted or embraced.

Because dominant definitions of gender and sexuality exist as dichotomies rather than continuums, individuals who fall somewhere in the middle or outside of the binaries face discrimination and invalidation (Ochs 1996). Here Liam explains how he and his friends felt about bisexuals prior to his transition: “I didn’t believe in bisexual at that point in time. A friend was like, ‘They just need to make up their mind’ and I was like, ‘Yeah!’” This description of how Liam and his friends perceived bisexuals prior to his transition reflects the belief that bisexuality is not a valid sexual identity, but rather a place of indecisiveness.

Ultimately, respondents explain that prior to the transition, they sometimes conceptualized sex, gender, and sexuality in highly rigid and dichotomous ways. These individuals live within a society which bases its notions of sex, gender, and sexuality on heteronormative ideologies (Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Up until the transition, respondents may not have been exposed to alternative forms of gender and sexual expression, preventing them from questioning the beliefs with which

they grew up. Once faced with their own transition or a transitioning partner, they begin to realize that sex, gender, and sexuality are not as “black and white” as they once believed, as James indicated above. According to Shapiro (2007), when individuals are exposed to alternative forms of gender and sexual expression, they begin to think differently about gender and sexuality in general, as well as how they themselves are gendered and sexual beings.

Learning Trans-Normativity

Within the trans-community dominant (and heteronormatively-informed) notions of gender and sexuality influence the guiding principles of what it means to be “trans.” In this study, respondents refer to the larger trans-community’s prescriptive regarding how FtMs should change their bodies. For example, respondents felt pressure from the larger trans-community to conform to a particular trans-identity which entails a combination of body modification procedures including hormone treatment and surgery.

Additionally, FtMs’ sexual acts fall within trans-normative scrutiny; this includes engaging in sex in ways that are consistent with a male/man/masculine identity. I define trans-normativity as dominant beliefs within the transgender community which provide over-arching guidelines about what it means to be transgender. For FtM transpersons, prevailing notions suggest that to be a “transman,” one should conform to hegemonic masculinity through gender and sexual expression. Furthermore, one should seek to change one’s body through hormonal treatment and/or surgical procedures. Although interviewees generally found such scrutiny limiting and restrictive, some complied with body modification and sexual behavior “trans-identity” guidelines, and the partners of

FtMs in the study discussed how difficult it was to negotiate intimacy and sex with their transitioning partners. Such difficulties were often the result of trans-normative or heteronormative influences.

The transition process leads to important shifts in how transmen and partners of transmen think about gender, sexuality, and their intimate lives. While the transition process does not always change the gender or sexual identities of respondents, it does prompt them to reevaluate how they think about gender and sexuality in general. Trans-normativity, or, the regulation of trans-identities and trans-bodies came up in conversation with a few of the respondents. The larger trans-community provides individuals with expectations and guidelines for what it means to be a transperson, often causing transmen to question their identities *as transmen*. Those individuals who deviate from these rules and guidelines feel as if they do not belong. As Angela observed:

He [my trans-partner] was very confused in the beginning whether he was fully trans because he used to go to these meetings and he would come back and tell me that he didn't feel like he belonged there because he didn't want hormones or top surgery. So, he didn't feel fully trans.

From his experiences at meetings for transpersons, Angela's trans-partner understood that to be trans, each person should have individual based goals that reflect more common patterns followed within the larger trans-community (e.g., hormone treatment before surgery). While diversity does exist with the ordering of the various stages of the transition process, notions that transmen *should* want to physically alter their bodies (through hormones and surgeries) to become men *do* prevail. For Angela's trans-partner, if he was to be trans and identify as such, he should exhibit some desire to alter his body through hormonal or surgical procedures. Angela's partner did not feel that these

procedures were necessary to become a transgender person; for him it was more about self-expression and gender presentation, and less about body modification. Zane, a FtM transperson previously involved with another FtM transperson, tells a similar story:

He [my former trans-partner] was like, "I don't have a desire to go on hormones. Maybe I will, but right now I don't want to." Part of that was, he expressed feelings of whether or not that made him trans or not. I know he had a lot of hesitancy of adopting the trans label to self identify or even to identify as part of the trans community. I think he internalized a lot of messages that you know, you have to go on hormones and have surgery and that is what makes you trans. He felt like he didn't deserve that trans ID card.

Both of these examples display the communication of trans-normative messages within the trans-community. These messages tell transpersons or those individuals who are trying to identify themselves as trans, that being trans means that you must need or desire certain things. For FtM transpersons, they must want to masculinize themselves through the use of hormones and surgeries.

The influence of trans-normative messages further shapes how some respondents think about sexual desire as a transman. James explains the following:

Yeah, it seems like before I transitioned, I was really black and white about male and female and I thought, everything that I thought sexually had to be from a straight male perspective. If I had any sort of inkling of being attracted to men or wanting to be sexual as a woman, there was something wrong and that I needed to answer the question for myself whether or not I'm a transsexual, I need to have certain feelings sexually.

For James, being a female-to-male transperson meant that his desires should be consistent with traditional heterosexual male desire. To have sexual desires outside of this led him to question whether or not he was truly a transperson or not. James' statement points to the extending reach of trans-normative messages in that there are presumably certain forms of sexual expression and desire that fall under trans-normative guidelines for FtM

transpersons. Interestingly, these trans-normative messages are a reflection of heteronormative messages. To be trans, one must have a “matching” body (sex) and mind (gender) which is consistent with male-female and man-woman binaries. Furthermore, the ideal form of sex is heterosexual in practice rather than homosexual. Not all transpersons believe or agree with these messages. The fact that respondents acknowledged that there are multiple forms of acceptable gender and sexual desire, even among transpersons, attests to this. However, the influence of heteronormative beliefs on trans-individuals becomes clear when respondents describe their experiences with the larger trans-community. The influence of dominant constructions of appropriate gender and sexual desire indicates that breaking away from heteronormativity is a highly complicated and potentially impossible task (Butler 1993, 2004).

Although assumptions about appropriate and inappropriate sexuality and gender expression are certainly influenced by heteronormative, and in some cases, trans-normative beliefs, respondents explain that post-transition, they are less likely to have rigid or restrictive views of gender and sexuality. For example, James observed:

Over the years, I've gone through the process of what sexually—where I'm at. It changes all of the time. I'm becoming more and more comfortable with whatever fantasy turns me on at the time is okay. I still have a ways to go because sometimes I do have some discomfort about some fantasies, or sexually, what I enjoy. But at least I opened myself up to different possibilities and realizing I'm taking testosterone, I've got the male body that I want, people see me as male, I feel really free in that regard so my sexual inclinations can go anyplace. As I think about it, that is true for anybody. But before I transitioned, I think I needed things to be really black and white. So yeah, it's changed. It's changed quite a bit.

As their bodies became consistent with how they perceive themselves, they were then able to become more explorative with respect to sex and intimacy.

These narratives shed light on the influence of trans-normative (and, thus, heteronormative) ideologies within the larger trans-community. The over-arching guidelines detail what it means to be trans, and in some cases, causes individuals who believe themselves to be trans to question their identity because they may not fit nicely within dominant definitions of “transgender.” This is an example of how rigid definitions of gender and sexuality can lead to sexual self-policing (Gamson 1995; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994) which limit one’s form of sexual desire. In the next section, I further elaborate on how the transition process leads to changes in the intimate lives of transmen and their partners.

Intimacy and Trans-Bodies

As the bodies of transmen change, so do the ways they and their partners think about intimacy and trans-bodies. These changes lead to shifts in how transmen and partners of transmen interact intimately with respect to trans-bodies. As indicated above, for some, the transition process can lead to a more open and explorative sexuality (resisting gender norms). For others, the transition can lead to more restrictive thinking and sexual practices (complying with gender norms). For example, a few respondents indicated that they had trouble thinking about themselves or their partners as “men” when the bodies of transmen did not fully “match up” with dominant notions of what a man should look like physically.

Interviewer: How about sex? Whether it be the physical act of it or the body—male and female. Have your ideas changed?

Nicole: Well, how I think about bodies with relation to sexual relationships, like around that...I would say that because I know, hm...not having a penis with a person who identifies as male, I think, is problematic when it comes to sex. It just

becomes an issue even though you don't want it to be an issue. It becomes an issue because, you know, I think it...(pause)...I think it puts a little bit of strain on the actual having sex. I think it just does. And...because, um, because in some way, I'm like, "Yeah, having a detachable penis is cool and all," (laughing) but when it comes to the actually, the sexual part, there is no way to avoid the fact that he doesn't have a penis and that is what he would really like to have. I think for me, I wish that too. This would be a lot easier. We wouldn't have to do this other stuff. It would just be a lot easier.

Interviewer: So specifically, with being with someone who identifies as male but doesn't have a penis?

Nicole: Right because it just makes, I don't know. He would like to have one and it would make it easier.

Nicole points to the presence of a penis as something that could make sex easier or more functional. Rather than using a "detachable penis," Nicole argues, sex would be "more simple" if he just had a penis that was attached to his body permanently. While a functioning attached penis could make the act of sex itself easier, an attached penis could also make sex easier because there would be less of a need for mental work. In other words, it is quite possible that sex is more difficult because the way that she and her partner envision her partner's body differs from his actual physical body, which at this point in time, lacks a penis. If both Nicole and her partner Liam imagine him as having a penis, it makes sense that negotiating sex without a penis could be different and perhaps more difficult. Note that Nicole did not indicate that she wanted Liam to have a penis because of the way that it feels physically. She only discussed the complications of using a detachable penis.

Similarly, James alludes to the difficulties of sex when the physical body does not match how one feels:

Pre-transition, there was fantasy as far as intimacy goes, but it was harder to fantasize about things because, well, it's hard to think my body is male when I've got boobs. That was really hard for me to do. Even now, even though I haven't had lower surgery, there have been enough changes, like growth in clitoris and stuff to make it easier to fantasize about having a regular penis. So that has been really fun. We both enjoyed that I think.

Heteronormative ideologies purport that gender corresponds with a specifically sexed body. Transmen do seem to believe that one should bring their body in alignment with its appropriate and corresponding gender category. In other words, there seems to be an understanding that corresponding bodies and genders *do exist*. The process of transitioning is based on the idea that one's body and mind should match. Transpersons feel that prior to transitioning, bodies and minds do not match with respect to gender identity. In order to correct this mismatch of body and mind, they change their bodies with the goal of bringing both body and mind into accordance with one another.

This conceptualization of "matching" genders and bodies becomes more apparent when we see that as transmen's bodies change, they feel more comfortable. Their narratives point to the belief that one's physically sexed (male or female) body should be consistent with a particular gender identity (man or woman), so that an individual who identifies as a man should have a body that is consistent with male bodies (eg., facial or body hair, masculine chest, deep voice). Above, James explains that once he experienced clitoral growth from taking testosterone, he had an easier time imagining himself as having a penis (and being a man). Such thinking indicates that his understanding of "man" is someone who has a specific "male" body. Thinking about gender and sex in this traditional way is consistent with heteronormativity. This way of thinking leaves out alternate forms of expression that may not "match up" to dominant definitions.

Therefore, someone who has a “female” body, but identifies as “male,” may feel obligated to change his body even though he may be perfectly comfortable with having female body parts such as breasts or a vagina. Once again, overarching trans-normative regulations shape understandings of what it means to be transgender.

This matching of bodies and genders also applies to what type of sexual activity is or is not appropriate. Randi describes how sex with her transitioning partner shifted:

Randi: I don’t know if this is TMI [Too Much Information], but as far as the kind of sex we were having, it shifted. There were things that initially were okay, but then he wasn’t okay with penetration. I think he felt that it emasculated him. So that was a definite marked shift. Unless I was in drag, then it was okay (laughs). T⁸ [Testosterone] sort of changed how he experienced pleasure so that shifted things a bit. We just sort of adapted. That wasn’t problematic or anything; it was just, “Okay, well let’s try this thing, it’s new.”

Interviewer: Could you talk about—and if I’m getting too personal, you don’t have to answer anything that you don’t want to, I just find it really interesting. Could you describe how T changed how he experienced pleasure differently?

Randi: Part of the T—it enlarges the clitoris. That shifted how we thought about sex. Like whether it was oral sex or whether we were using hands. It just shifted how we thought about things because it isn’t a clitoris anymore, it is a cock. We changed our orientation towards it—of course language, how we talked about things changed too.

Randi indicates that once her partner began transitioning, she no longer penetrated him. She believes that he felt that the act of penetration emasculated him. Randi did not specify whether or not her partner said that he felt that it emasculated him, but that was her interpretation. If her assessment is correct, her partner may have become less comfortable with the act of penetration because it made him more “woman-like.”

⁸ “T” refers to “testosterone.” This reference is quite common among female-to-male transpersons who often take testosterone either by injection, pill, or a gel-based substance in order to masculinize their bodies.

For lesbians, there sometimes exists a butch-femme dynamic where one partner is more masculine (butch) and the other partner is more feminine (femme) (Kennedy and Davis 1993). Within the butch lesbian identity exists the “stone butch.” A “stone butch” is a masculine lesbian who does not allow her partner to touch her intimately (Halberstam 1998a; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestle 1992). Halberstam (1998a:123) explains that the “stone” in stone butch refers to impenetrability. An individual that is a stone butch will penetrate her partner but absolutely refuses to allow her partner to penetrate her. For Randi, her partner displayed these characteristics in that he did not want her to penetrate him. This is also similar to how many heterosexual men present themselves with respect to sexual activity. However, a stone butch differs from other “masculine” lovers in that she does not allow her partner to touch her intimately in any way whatsoever. Whereas many masculine lovers (whether they are gay, lesbian, straight, etc.) allow their sexual partners to provide them with sexual fulfillment through physical touch, a stone butch does not.

Interestingly, the commonality across these forms of sexual interactions is that the more masculine partner will penetrate the more feminine partner. This indicates that dominant notions of masculinity and femininity remain highly influential for both heterosexual and homosexual communities. Randi’s experience suggests that such understandings of masculinity and femininity also influence the trans-community. Her partner may have been less comfortable with being penetrated because he identifies as male and does not want to feel “like a woman,” or the traditionally “bottom” partner who does not act but is acted upon by a “top.” However, Randi also explains that penetration

was permissible when she was in drag.⁹ That is, when Randi dressed as a man and penetrated her partner, the act was acceptable, highlighting Randi's partner's wishes to mimic sex conceptualized only by one partner, the transitioning person. In this case, Randi had to play the role of a man in order to gain permission to penetrate her partner. Once again, this practice is consistent with the notion that men penetrate, but women do not. Randi was not clear about what her partner wanted in terms of sex, but possible scenarios include heterosexual, gay, queer, or something else. Regardless of the reasoning, the meaning attributed to the act of penetration (as well as the permissibility of the act) can change depending on the perceived genders and sexualities of the individuals involved.

Randi also explains that as testosterone changed her partner's body, as a couple, they both changed how they thought about and spoke about his body. In this example, she indicates that testosterone increased the size of his clitoris.¹⁰ This change in her partner's body led them to think differently about his genitals. Rather than thinking of him as having a clitoris, they instead think of him as having a cock. This shift in thinking and language caused them to interact with his body in a way that is consistent with their new understanding of his body. That is, they think of him as having body parts deemed "male" as opposed to "female." In short, the appropriate form of intimacy depends on how they were reading his body at any given time. What they define as sexually

⁹ Drag is when an individual dresses and acts like someone from the "opposite" sex/gender category (Shapiro 2007).

¹⁰ The enlarged clitoris is sometimes referred to as a "dicklet" or a "micro-penis" within the FtM trans-community.

acceptable acts depends on whether or not they think of him as having a clitoris or a penis.

Several respondents discussed how the meaning they attributed to trans-bodies shifted throughout the transition process. Mel describes how she and her partner had difficulty at times when her partner felt that she was touching him in a way that was inconsistent with his gender identity:

I remember a couple of times that we were having sex and he would just freeze and stop and he would be like, “You’re touching me like I’m a girl. Stop it.” Or maybe not say stop it, but he would absolutely freeze up and be like, “You’re touching me like a girl.” So, there had to be an adjustment there. I had to kind of, that was hard at times. I was like, “I don’t know how else to touch you,” you know? But that was something that we had to talk about and work through and experiment with—about what didn’t bring out those reactions in him.

Mel and her partner had to renegotiate how they thought about and interacted with his body (and her body). Mel’s partner felt as though she was touching him “like a girl” which means, in a traditional heterosexual sense, that the male was the traditional instigator of sex, much like following the gendered script between men and women in straight sexual encounters (Bogle 2008). However, Mel had not changed how she was being intimate with him, and this was no longer acceptable—he wanted to be thought of as a guy in *all* ways, including being treated as a guy during sexual interactions. For Mel, she was just touching her partner like she always had. Mel did not elaborate on whether or not her touching him like she always had meant that she was touching him in ways lesbians sometimes do—presumably manipulating his body parts (e.g., breasts and clitoris), or touching him softly, treating him “like a woman.” Mel and her partner had to negotiate with one another on how he could be touched during intimacy.

Mel is similar to other trans partners, who are now relearning how to have sex with the transitioning person in a way that they want. In other words, the transgender individual communicated that they needed to be touched in a way that they believed was consistent with their newly formed masculine identities—penetrating and not penetrated. This example indicates that even the ways that we touch bodies can potentially be coded as masculine or feminine. Karen gives a similar account:

Little by little, nuances about him changed that weren't even his physical appearance but just like the way he liked to be touched or not touched. There was A LOT of sort of like no touch zones and there were a lot of different stages he went through where, like, we used to kiss all of the time and now he doesn't really like to kiss at all. And he says, "I don't really know why, it just doesn't feel the same as it used to feel to me." Our sex life has paid a huge price in this. Although, he assures me that once he is done with all of the surgeries that he wants to have that we are going to get back, I shouldn't say get back, we're going to go to a new place that is more like where we came from. I don't really know if I'm holding out for that or not. I just sort of, I'm trying to be in the day and not be so future focused all of the time. That is where my pain has been around—the changes that I didn't know were going to happen.

Transitioning then, can create changes in how transmen experience their bodies. In this particular case, Karen has a hard time accepting these changes because of the reactions they cause in her partner. She is optimistic that once her partner undergoes "all of the surgeries that he wants," their sex life will improve. Ultimately, they hope that once he is satisfied with his body, he will be comfortable and open up sexually. However, she also explains that she is unsure if that will actually happen. To cope, she lives in the present rather than focusing on the future which might not hold the sex life she would like to have.

Although taking testosterone can lead to an increased sex drive, as multiple respondents indicated, as transmen transition, they may desire to have sex in different

ways than before. In the above examples, they did not want to be treated like women, especially during sexual intimacy. Partners of transmen were not the only ones in the study to talk about the shifts in intimacy and acceptable forms of touching. Tucker acknowledges that he and his former partner had to negotiate with one another and work around the issue of him not wanting to be touched in a particular way:

One thing that I found, as I was taking testosterone, like having my chest touched, there was a period of time that I was not okay with that and a period of time that I was okay with that. Throughout the relationship, my boundaries changed. So having to negotiate...first thing, having to express that, and then having to negotiate what I was comfortable with and then what she was comfortable with—which didn't always link up. When I became comfortable with her touching my chest, she still was not comfortable with that.

Tucker did not explain whether or not he had breasts at the time that this scenario occurred. However, at the time of the interview he had been on testosterone for seven years and had top-surgery (both breasts removed). While Tucker does not explain exactly why his boundaries changed, or when in the transition process those changes happened, Tucker does explain that it took effort to both articulate the change to his partner and then to have to try and work through it. His partner was not always okay with the new changes. When he became comfortable with being touched, his partner did not necessarily feel comfortable touching him.

The discomfort with touching transmen “like a woman” can be incredibly emotional for both transmen and partners of transmen. For transmen, this discomfort stems from their desire to change their bodies so that they appear (and feel) more like the bodies of men. Certainly several transmen and biological males enjoy having their chests touched or being touched softly, but for these respondents, such actions seem to be coded

as “feminine” and therefore create problems for transmen and their partners as the transmen react to their discomfort.

The shifting understanding of trans-bodies can be complicated and difficult to negotiate. For some, coming to an understanding was much easier. Transmen in relationships with individuals that identify as queer had fewer problems with this particular aspect of the transition. However, although queer partners might be more willing to take on new understandings of trans-bodies, the process of renegotiating how one thinks can still be difficult and time-consuming. Ultimately, the changes that transmen undergo during the transition process, create significant shifts in how they think and interact with respect to gender, sexuality, and intimacy. Transmen and partners of transmen must reevaluate how they conceptualize gender, sexuality, trans-bodies, and intimacy. This often leads to significant changes in individuals’ understandings of the gendered and sexual world in which they live.

Thinking Beyond the Binary

For many respondents, being transgender or being in a relationship with someone who is transgender led them to rethink their assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality. This reevaluation in turn created a more accepting view of gender and sexual identities that fall “in between” or “outside” of the binaries. Susan describes how being in a relationship with a transman shifted her thinking:

When I met James and started to explore that whole journey with him, I really began to see the fluidity of gender on a deeper level. Yeah there were drag queens and drag kings and cross dressing and stuff, but it took on this whole amazing spectrum. Not even linear—kind of a multi-directional gender, sexual orientation—anything on the continuum that you can imagine.

Similarly, Randi identifies gender (and sex) as being open and diverse, using her background in academic sociology to do so. Randi indicates here that there are multiple “sex” categories including male/female, but also intersex, for example as she describes the continuum of sex categories:

We’ve got multiple sex categories which we don’t often talk about but they are there. We’ve got this sort of rainbow of sex and there are not really relationships between, there is no corresponding gender. Gender is multiple—there aren’t two, there aren’t 500, there are so many.

Both Susan and Randi break away from heteronormative ideologies of sex and gender in that they provide room for alternative forms. Randi pushes this thinking further when she explains that no fixed relationship exists between biological sex and gender expression. From her position, the possibilities of gender are infinite and the expression one chooses is not dependent upon one’s biological sex.

These particular explanations of sex, gender, and sexuality are consistent with queer theorists who challenge prevailing gender and sexual binaries. As Seidman (1994) asserts, these binaries limit and impede human expression. Heteronormative categorizations of sex, gender, and sexuality serve to exclude individuals from “a range of possible ways to frame one’s self, body, desires, actions, and social relations” (Seidman 1994:173). Because of this, heteronormative categories and identities should be deconstructed so as to allow for more plurality and diversity in culture (Gamson 1995; Seidman 1994).

Liam and Tucker, both transmen, explained how their sexuality was once impeded by such rigid understandings of sexuality and gender. As Liam observed:

When I was younger, I came out as a lesbian at 15 or 16 years old. I identified myself as such and then I wouldn't allow myself to be attracted to any guy. I had to be—I was a lesbian. I had to be attracted to women.

Liam's statement exemplifies queer theorists' assertions that sexual identities lead individuals to regulate and restrict themselves rather than allow for alternative ways of being (Gamson 1995; Seidman 1995). Like Liam, Tucker also points to the rigidity of his lesbian identity and his initial understanding of what it meant to be a lesbian:

Prior to transitioning, when I came out as lesbian, my mentors were like, second wave lesbian feminist separatists. I spent a lot of time as a woman-born woman....which led to a lot of my gender phobia and transphobia at the time, before transitioning. But I'm more fluid with my gender and sexuality. I still struggle with gender rigidity. I don't want to jump to being that opposite, so trying to find that balance. That part has definitely changed.

According to Tucker, his relationships with "second wave, lesbian, feminist separatists" shaped his understanding of gender and as well as what forms of gender expression were acceptable, leading him to believe that transgender was not a permissible gender identity. Halberstam (1998b:293) contends that many lesbians identify FtMs as traitors in that they are women who have "become the enemy." In her analysis of biphobia in gay and lesbian communities, Ochs (1996:229) explains that during the U.S. lesbian feminist movement of the 1970s, "the lesbian label came to embody the concept of resistance to sexism and patriarchy." Those women who maintained *any* ties with men were viewed as associating with the enemy and patriarchy (Ochs 1996). Ochs further explains that this form of thinking still exists in lesbian communities so that individuals that remain tied to men (and thus patriarchy) are enemies or traitors to the lesbian community. These beliefs inform community members of both what is acceptable and not acceptable when it comes to gender and sexual expression. This can lead to the policing and regulation of presumed

lesbian bodies and desire. Liam also explains how having a strong lesbian identity caused him to believe that he was only allowed to have a specific form of sexual attraction:

I was really deep into my lesbian identity and really felt you could be one thing. You could only be attracted to one thing, one group, one gender. Even within that, within the gender, you could only be attracted to one type of person that fit your criteria. Now it is not very linear anymore. It is a lot more fluid—especially going through the early transition when you're genderqueer. A lot of my transguy friends were dating other transguys and that blew my mind. I couldn't figure that out at all. It has been interesting but it has changed a lot over the years.

Here, Tucker and Liam explain that they have moved away from rigid and linear understandings of gender and sexuality; instead, they perceive both to be more fluid. These respondents identify their strong lesbian identities as shaping their previously restrictive understandings of sexuality and gender. Again, these examples point to the legitimacy of claims made by some queer theorists who argue that sexual identities and categories can limit human expression (Gamson 1995; Seidman 1994). However, notions of what can or cannot be or what is or is not right can change when faced with examples that contradict one's beliefs (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007; Shapiro 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). For instance, Liam explains how he was “blown away” by the different types of attraction that could exist when he was exposed to transmen who were in intimate relationships with other transmen. This exposure enabled Liam to see that sexual attraction is more complex than allowed for by the gay-straight binary. Furthermore, Liam recognizes that sexual attraction does not have to be monosexual but instead, one can be attracted to multiple types of persons and genders.

In her analysis of a travelling drag king troupe, Shapiro (2007) finds that exposure to alternative forms of gender and sexual expression created an environment where

members could try on and explore new identities. Such exposure ultimately led to several members shifting how they thought about their own identities as well as sex, gender, and sexuality in general. For participants in this study, the transition process serves as a similar means in that it exposes transmen and partners of transmen to different ways of thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality. More specifically, the transition process contradicts heteronormative beliefs which are relatively fixed and rigid, thus allowing for forms of sexuality and gender which are much more “open” or “fluid.”

If exposure to alternate forms of sexuality and gender expression create changes in how individuals identify themselves, it should not be surprising that over half of the respondents identified themselves as “queer” or as having “no orientation.” These individuals described themselves as being open about who they choose as intimate partners. As Karen explains, “I identify as queer because I feel that if I fell in love with a human being, it wouldn’t matter to me what their sexual or their body parts are. I don’t think there is a body that I couldn’t make love to.” For Karen, and many other respondents, they state that their sexualities are more open than restricting, yet at times, they continue to use strict and traditional definitions of gender, even through the transitioning process. This outlook was also shared by Susan and Angela, who identified as lesbians. While they held onto their lesbian identities, both explained that they also felt attracted to their partners who are transmen as well as other transmen or genderqueer individuals. This trend is consistent with Pfeffer’s (2008) analysis of women partners of transmen, who often retain their lesbian identities despite their relationship with someone who does not identify as a female or woman.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that the transition process can lead to shifts in how respondents conceptualize sex, gender, and sexuality. By engaging in the transitioning process or being in a relationship with someone who identifies as “trans,” individuals expose themselves to alternative ways of thinking, thus changing their own perceptions of the sexual and gendered world in which we live. Through this exposure, the meanings that respondents associate with sex, gender, sexuality, intimacy, and trans-bodies undergo various transformations. By studying the experiences of transmen and partners of transmen, researchers gain insight to the malleability and highly constructed nature of all things gendered and sexual. Such findings contradict dominant understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality as fixed or natural and instead point to the legitimacy of queer or social constructionist perspectives.

Although transmen and their partners report that their understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality are fluid and less rigid than prevailing heteronormative ideologies (as described in this chapter), the narratives which I discuss in Chapter 6, point to heavy influences of heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. In the Chapter 5, I describe how transmen engage in social interactions now that they pass as men. Because transmen have engaged in social interactions as women and as men, their accounts provide insight into the gendered organization of social interactions as well as the gendered meanings that come into play in day-to-day interactions with men, women, and children. As transmen perform their genders, they do so in ways that are consistent with dominant expectations of how men should act. In other words, others hold them accountable for performing gender correctly (West and Zimmerman 1987), and transmen

often engage in social interactions as expected (as men). Conforming to societal expectations of masculine behavior and gender presentation leads to several negative consequences, such as a loss of visibility or negative emotional responses of partners, which I elaborate on in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5

THE COMPLEXITIES OF “DOING GENDER” AS TRANSMEN

In this chapter, I use interviews with four FtM-identified transmen to analyze how transmen negotiate their social interactions with men, women, and children. Through their stories, the influence of perceived gender on daily interactions becomes apparent. An individual's gender presentation determines what we expect from them and what is or is not appropriate in various social interactions. By looking at the experiences of transmen, researchers can gain further insight into how gender structures and regulates interactions that take place among men, between men and women, and between men and women with children. I find that how people interact and what they can say, is often dependent upon the presumed genders of those persons involved in the interaction. The experiences of transmen are useful to draw upon because they provide a unique opportunity to analyze gendered relations. Transmen detail what it is like to interact with others as men *and* as women. These experiences shed light on the gendered meanings attributed to behavior and social interactions. The very existence of individuals who can live and interact with others as both men and women points to a social, rather than biological, understanding of gender.

Our society organizes social interactions around the notion that there are “inherent differences” between men and women (Lorber 1994; Risman 2004; West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Wharton 2005). West and Fenstermaker (1995) argue that as we “do gender,” we also “do difference.” I find this to be applicable in the case of FtM transpersons. To pass successfully as men, transmen must consciously

avoid doing femininity while simultaneously doing masculinity. I use the terms “doing femininity” and “doing gender” to describe the practice whereby some social actors “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) in ways that are consistent with exaggerated femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987).

Transmen, like all social actors face accountability when it comes to their gender performance (West and Zimmerman 1987). Because transmen appear to be cismen,¹¹ they receive an intense amount of pressure to conform to hegemonic definitions of masculinity. Although the majority of trans-identified respondents indicated that they want to be visible as “transmen” and not cismen, (a topic I further elaborate on in the next chapter), their accounts of social interactions indicate that they often conform to traditional forms of masculine gender presentation. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that those individuals that fail to conform meet resistance. Because of this, social actors often perform their gender in a way that is consistent with dominant expectations because it allows them to maintain their position in society.

This task is complicated for transmen in that they have spent the majority of their lives as social women and they lack the tools and gender socialization necessary to confidently act as cismen do. Acting in ways deemed feminine often leads to social consequences such as the questioning of transmen’s status as gendered and sexual beings. If transmen display behavior that others construe as feminine behavior, they risk exposing their identities as transmen or they risk being labeled gay men—a status

¹¹ “Cismen” and “ciswomen” are terms commonly used within the transgender and queer communities when referring to a person who is not transgender. These terms are preferred over terms such as “biological men” or “biological women” (Pfeffer 2009).

understood to be inferior to heterosexual men within a hegemonic masculinity framework (Connell 1987). Therefore, it is important to do gender successfully because there are several benefits that transmen receive for passing as social men. Schwalbe (2008) explains that as individuals convince others that they are who they say they are, they receive various benefits or *side bets*. As transmen do masculinity and “pass,” they receive various benefits that accompany the status of social man. For instance, Schilt (2006) explains that transmen who transition on the job experience an increase in prestige, respect, and overall social status. In addition to these types of benefits, transmen who “pass” also avoid receiving a stigmatized status (transgender or trans) which might lead to negative consequences such as mistreatment, discrimination, or even physical harm (Butler 2004; Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

By analyzing the experiences of individuals who have lived both as men and as women, observers gain insight into the highly gendered nature of individual interactions. Not only do we expect men and women to act differently from one another, we interpret interactions differently depending on the perceived genders of those involved. Therefore, a man touching a woman in conversation has different meaning than a woman doing the same thing. Transmen must consciously negotiate through these interactions to avoid creating uncomfortable situations or putting themselves at risk in any way.

As transmen begin transitioning, their gender expression shifts from woman-to-man. This alters both how they view themselves, and how other people interact with them. One’s gender presentation is highly influential in shaping the meaning that we assign to our social interactions (Dozier 2005; Green 2005; Lucal 1999) as well as what

we expect from one another as gendered beings (Lucal 1999; Schilt 2006). Therefore, how we code or interpret an interaction is dependent upon how we read the gender of the persons involved in that interaction (Howard and Hollander 1997). Because the perceived gender of transpersons shifts, the way that people interact with them also shifts. Prior to their transitioning, people interacted with the four pre-transmen in this study as “masculine” women. In other words, outsiders perceived them as butch lesbians or as androgynous individuals. In some cases, pre-transpeople portray ambiguously gendered individuals because they possess a mixture of supposed “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics. Once transmen begin to pass successfully as men, others begin to interact with them in a way that is specific to interaction with a man. This shift in social interactions can be confusing and sometimes problematic for transmen who do not yet know how to interact as social men.

Despite their identification with a more masculine form of self-presentation, the fact remains that for the majority of their lives, transmen grew up and engaged in social interactions as girls and then as women. Each of the respondents in this study lived and presented as masculine or androgynous women (e.g., “butch”) prior to transitioning. While they may have not been acting in accord with the norms of “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987), transmen in this study were still viewed as social women. Thus, the behaviors and actions that they were able to engage in were considered acceptable for women. Through these interactions, they acquired “tools” to help them interact as gendered beings with other gendered persons (Swidler 1986). More specifically, they learned how to “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) in ways very

specific to their own gender and sexual presentations: as masculine or androgynous women, or as butch lesbians.

Swidler (1986:273) envisions “culture as a ‘tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” In other words, we acquire various tools that help us understand what to do and how to act in a variety of social situations. This is consistent with West and Zimmerman’s (1987) contention that over the course of our lives, we learn how to “do gender” appropriately. Gender socialization occurs at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman 2004; Wharton 2005). This socialization provides us with the necessary “tools” (Swidler 1986) that we need to accomplish gender in our daily lives (West and Zimmerman 1987). Until they transition, transmen spend the majority of their lives as social women. Because of this, the socialization that they receive is consistent with gender expectations for social women, albeit “masculine” women. As they acquire masculine characteristics such as deeper voices and facial hair, others begin reading them as men. Although transmen may “look” like cismen, they may not possess the social skills required to accomplish their new gender. In other words, they do not yet know how to “do gender” as men. Once they begin passing, they are able to interact with others as social men and therefore begin building the skills necessary to do masculinity (Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987).

In addition to relearning how to “do gender” (Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987), transmen must also negotiate the presumed sexual identity that coincides with the shift in gender presentation. In order to “do gender” correctly,

men and women must also “do difference” (West and Fenstermaker 1995). In other words, for one to do masculinity successfully, one must avoid doing femininity and vice versa. The experiences of transmen in this study demonstrate the validity of this claim. FtM transpersons find that they must consciously think about not doing femininity in order to successfully pass as men. In fact, respondents find that acting in ways that others may view as feminine can put them at risk of being “found out” as transmen, or that it leads to others labeling them as gay men. While transmen in this study said they did not care if other people read them as gay, they did acknowledge that being read in such a way could be problematic in that gay men have an inferior status to straight men in a heteronormative patriarchal society. This type of thinking is consistent with notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). Therefore, to pass as “regular men” (read: straight men), they must refrain from acting in feminine ways in certain situations.

Individuals who do not reject their ascribed gender status “do gender” according to the messages they have received from birth. Transpersons, however, must avoid doing their “old” gender while simultaneously taking on and performing their “new” gender. For example, because they lived as girls and social women, others hold them accountable for acting in ways labeled “feminine” such as using certain physical contact in interactions (such as hugging a friend or touching someone’s arm in empathy) or being nurturing and caring towards women and children. As transmen, they find that some of the behavior they used to engage in as women becomes suspicious now that they pass as social men. In their interactions with others, they must consciously avoid engaging in behavior defined as feminine. At the same time, they must also begin acting “like a man;”

something that does not yet come easily because of lack of socialization. In short, the efforts of transpersons to achieve their preferred gender status clearly highlight how gender is socially constructed.

Interactions with Men

As transmen undergo the status passage (Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2010; Strauss 1959) from female-to-male, they sometimes find themselves feeling uncomfortable or inauthentic in their interactions with others (Mason-Schrock 1996; Rubin 2003; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). For my research participants, this is especially true of those interactions with other men. When prompted to describe their social interactions with presumably straight men, most respondents explain that there is a constant discomfort in these interactions because they are not always certain how they should act. Again, because transmen grow up as girls and women, they never receive the social training which teaches them how to be men. Essentially, they lack the skills and knowledge necessary to interact confidently *as men*. In turn, they often feel uncertainty or anxiety when interacting with cismen who have more experience acting “like men.” Transmen like James explain that they are sometimes unaware of what the approved and socially sanctioned behavior is for any given situation:

I was at (University Name) as male, living full time male, but not really understanding how guys acted all the time. I was always checking myself. I was always checking and paying attention to behaviors of guys—just being very very aware of those interactions and trying to figure out: “Where is my comfort level? Do I need to behave a certain way so I’m not read as female? How male do I look?” You know, I still wasn’t sure and still kind of jumpy about going into the men’s bathrooms. So I just kind of stumbled through it.

This story is consistent with other research on transwomen and transmen, which explains that transpersons often experience feelings of inauthenticity as they begin learning how to act in ways consistent with their new gender presentation (Mason-Schrock 1996; Rubin 2003; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). Such feelings of inauthenticity can occasionally lead to anxiety in that they fear they will misbehave or that their identities as transmen may become apparent (Goffman 1963) to “real men” like Liam describes here:

I’m still not good at interacting with guys, like at a party, drinking beer or whatever. I’m always like, “What am I supposed to say? What am I supposed to do?” Those kinds of things—trying to figure all of that out, it was very emotional.

Here, James and Liam recognize that there is specific gender appropriate behavior that they should display in order to successfully pass as men. If they fail to perform correctly, their gender identities may come under the scrutiny of men who know the rules of masculinity.

Zane describes the consequences of not presenting himself as a successfully masculine and heterosexual male. In his opinion, Zane was not accepted into the “guy’s club” because he is an effeminate man who others read as gay. While not being included into the “guy’s club” may come off as being a bit superficial, Schilt (2006) finds that transmen receive varying levels of respect and recognition depending on their ability to perform as men. Schilt (2006) notes that those transmen who others read as gay or effeminate are more likely to face discrimination or harassment from their co-workers based on perceived sexuality, rather than gender presentation, *per se*. According to Zane, cismen treat him with more respect when he presents a more masculine self. He described this respect as being included in that “‘dude club’ where there is a lot of eye contact or

head nods or people are more likely to say sexist things.” Zane also feels that when straight men read him as a gay man, they value his opinion less; especially regarding topics that they believe him to hold biases about, such as gender or sexuality. The reactions that Zane receives depend on how well he performs hegemonic masculinity.

Although transmen are aware of the risks associated with failing to do masculinity appropriately, they may choose to avoid doing masculinity so that they can engage in interactions that they find to be both more fulfilling and comfortable. In many cases, such interactions are those based in supposed “feminine” values (e.g., emotionally intimate conversations and behavior). For example, James describes a scenario where he acknowledges that he knows what others expect of him as a man, yet he chooses to act differently because he wishes to take part in what he considers to be more meaningful conversations:

It has taken me years to really feel at peace with the way I interact with guys. I feel, well, up until the last few years, I’ve just felt more comfortable with groups of women, even at work. I noticed one day at work, we were having a social thing in the summer, kind of a barbecue deal, a team building thing. I was talking to some people and I looked around and all the guys were standing by the barbecue talking about how they grill and how they build a barbecue or fire and stuff. All the women were all together talking about what women talk about. I was over in the group of women (laughs). I was like, “Oh! I can’t do this. I’ll be suspect.” So I strolled over to the group of guys and the conversation was *so boring*. It was just like talking about their barbecuing skills and how they do the coals and all of this stupid stuff. The women were talking about more in depth, more things that had meaning in my opinion. So I went back to the women’s group and was just like whatever, “I’m just going to be involved in a conversation that is more interesting to me.” ‘Cause, what the men were talking about was just dumb and I didn’t even want to even pretend that I could join that conversation and feel comfortable about it.

James' description points to a gendered understanding of communication. His story is consistent with common views of women as communicative beings that talk about "meaningful things," while men do not. Liam expresses a similar view:

Like I said earlier, around guys, I don't really know what to say or do, but I'm starting to realize that *most guys don't know what to say or do*—that's why they talk about sports all the time. They don't talk about feelings. They tell stories, drink beer, and talk about sports.

These examples provide insight into how our culture views the role of gender in how we communicate with one another (Howard and Hollander 1997; Tannen 1990). We understand that men talk about things that involve less emotion, and presumably less meaning, while we expect women to engage in conversations that overflow with feeling and depth. This understanding of men's and women's differing communication skills are consistent with West and Fenstermaker's (1995) contention that men and women are expected to act differently, and in some cases, as "opposites" to one another. If we expect women to be emotional and have deep, meaningful conversations, then we should not expect men to engage in that form of behavior.

Transmen are aware of these differences in interactions because they have lived and communicated *as women* with other women and men in earlier parts of their lives. They find themselves uncomfortable in conversations as men because the majority of their past experiences have been lived as women, but also because they feel that they are now somehow missing out on important and meaningful conversations to which they have become accustomed. Transmen may identify "women's conversations" as being better because those are the types of conversations they are used to, and because they have not yet begun to appreciate "men's conversations." However, the discomfort they

express does not stem merely from not knowing what to say; it also comes from knowing that they no longer have what they once did.

Interactions with Women

The interactions that transmen have with women might seem to come easily since they were once social women. However, it is important to remember that transmen are attempting to learn how to behave as social men in their interactions with women. Because they lack a lifetime's experience of masculine gender socialization, they do not yet know how to interact with women *as men*. If women perceive transmen as men, they will expect transmen to act like men. As suggested earlier, it is often difficult for transmen to interact with others because they must do masculinity at the same time they avoid doing femininity. When asked about their interactions with women, transmen indicated that they can no longer act as they once did (*as social women*) because their behavior is interpreted differently now that they pass as men. In other words, gender influences how we make sense of our daily interactions, and of others' behavior and language. Therefore, the way that an individual understands an interaction depends on the perceived genders of those involved in the interaction. Two women or two men communicating with one another often plays out differently than a conversation between a man and woman because men and women are believed to behave in very specific and gendered ways (Tannen 1990).

Transmen explain that they have to be careful in their interactions with women to avoid awkward or uncomfortable situations. They explain that they can no longer act

“like a woman” when they are interacting with a woman. Zane describes his understanding of what is and is not appropriate when talking with women:

Because I see myself as trans and I live as trans, I have a much more complicated understanding of my gender identity, but other people see me as male. I’m constantly being reminded that people see me as male because of certain things, for example, when women, when they are talking to each other, they are more likely to touch each other. It’s like a friendly “hey.” Guys don’t do that. When they touch women, it is a very different interaction. It is coded in something that’s embedded in power or even like a sexual innuendo. It has been weird for me because I’ve seen it in the reaction of women’s faces which is like, “Why are you touching me?” Unless they are like, “Oh, you’re just some faggy gay guy.”

Because the conversation is interpreted differently for men than it is for women, there are different consequences in mixed gender social settings. In Zane’s case, touching women in conversations causes women to pause and question his action. He believes that if women read him as female, they would read the interaction as friendly. Because they read him as male, the meaning of the action changes to something that is potentially about power or sex, and thus becomes uncomfortable.

The meaning attributed to social interactions becomes further complicated by perceived sexuality. Zane explains that when straight women read him as a gay man, the interaction once again changes. Rather than assuming that the physical action relates to potential sexual attraction towards them, Zane feels that they instead read into his behavior as being representative of appropriate behavior for someone with his perceived sexual orientation. When men fail to do masculinity appropriately, they risk others labeling them as being gay. In a sense, we expect gay men to act in stereotypically effeminate ways. As Schippers (2007:96) explains, rather than associating men’s

homosexual desire with any form of masculinity, it is instead “constructed as decidedly feminine.” Therefore, when a perceived gay man acts “like a woman” by touching a woman that he interacts with, the action is not read in the same way it would be if he were seen as a heterosexual man. Rather than being about power or sex, the interaction is understood in the context of feminine behavior and friendship.

Transmen also explain that heterosexual women may interact with them as potential sexual partners when they begin passing as men. James discusses how women will flirt with him now that they perceive him to be a man. He explains that heterosexual women never interacted with him in a flirty or sexual way when he presented as a butch lesbian. This behavior reflects the influence of heteronormativity in our culture. Because “opposite-sex” attraction is the only acceptable and viable form of sexuality within a heteronormative and patriarchal society (Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009), women will be more likely to interact with men in a sexual way than they will with another woman. According to heteronormative standards, a woman who presents as a butch lesbian is non-normative in that she does not dress, look, or act like a woman should (Halberstam 1998a; Rubin 1992; Solomon 1993). If that same individual passes as a man, they become normative in that the perceived sex and gender presented “match” heteronormative definitions of maleness and masculinity. It is not surprising then, that women are more likely to flirt or sexualize their interactions with James when they perceive him to be a normative, heterosexual man.

Shared Experiences

Gender shapes our social interactions and our expectations of one another as social actors. This tendency becomes even more apparent when we focus on presumed *shared experiences*. Transmen often find themselves in conversations that revolve around a perceived gendered past which reflects their current gender presentation. Men and women assume that transmen grew up as boys and men. Because of this assumption, they believe that transmen lived through certain “male experiences.”

Transmen are often at a loss for words in these conversations about “men’s issues.” Because they did not grow up as boys and men, they do not share these experiences with men. James describes how he personally handles those types of interactions:

One day I was with a bunch of guys and the topic turned to sex. I can’t remember what specifically, but it was really personal stuff. If someone were to ask me about my prostate I wouldn’t know what to say. If someone were to ask me about certain “men’s only” things, I would have to just bumble through it. I think one time someone asked me about the draft. Some guys were talking about the selective service and how you have to register. I leave those conversations because if they were to ask me about my experiences, I don’t have that (laughing). I’m not going to go there and pretend like I do.

James explains that he has trouble contributing to these conversations because he lacks the experience required to make a comment. He also points out that he differs from cismen in that he does not have a prostate. Therefore, he is aware that there are physical and biological differences between cismen and himself. In this case, he cannot make a comment on his prostate because he does not have one, nor will he ever.

Transmen also describe the tendency of women to presume that shared experiences exist along gender lines. Rather than believe that they share experiences with

transmen, women assume that transmen cannot understand conversations involving “women’s issues.” According to Tucker, this sometimes creates awkward interactions with women:

It is interesting because I didn’t transition until I was thirty so sometimes women will be talking about menstrual cramps or something. Sometimes I’ll laugh or make a comment and I’m sure I come across as an asshole (laughing). “Uh, huh. Yeah, sure I should use some chamomile tea” (sarcastic tone).

In these interactions, the women are unaware of participants’ trans-identities. Because of this, they assume that transmen are cismen and therefore incapable of understanding what it is like to be a woman. James provides such an account:

I walk into conversations where women are talking about childbirth and they stop and look at me and say, “You have no idea what we are talking about.” Yet, I do. I just walk off. I don’t go there.

These conversations are somewhat frustrating for transmen because they do understand what it is like to be women and to go through certain “women’s experiences.” James, for instance, has given birth multiple times. Rather than explain that he does understand what it is like to go through childbirth, he chooses not to engage in these conversations. For him to describe these experiences, he would have to out himself as a transman to people with whom he does not feel comfortable being out. Rather than fake his way through these types of social interactions, James repeatedly expressed his preference to avoid situations in which he will have to pretend or lie about who he is as a gendered being. This tendency appears to be specific to James, who wished to maintain his status as a social man during social interactions with presumably cisgendered¹² persons.

¹² Cisgender is a term that describes non-transgender persons. This term is preferred by individuals in the trans-community over “biological men and women” (Pfeffer 2009).

Tucker finds that when he does contribute to conversations on “women’s issues,” he may come off as being insensitive. Once again, the meanings and interpretations of various interactions are dependent upon the perceived genders of those involved in the encounter. While a woman might accept a suggestion from a fellow woman regarding menstrual cramps, she may reject it from a man because she presumes that he cannot understand what it is like to have menstrual cramps.

These specific examples further display the significant influence of heteronormative notions in shaping our assumptions about individuals as gendered beings. More specifically, we often assume that an individual has a biological sex consistent with a specific gender. For transmen, because people read them as men, the assumption exists that they must have bodies that are biologically male. Such assumptions further speculate that transmen have had male bodies since birth, thereby shaping their day-to-day experiences as boys and men. Because our notions about gender and biological sex are shaped by heteronormative beliefs, the existence of individuals who deviate from heteronormative standards is often ignored. In a sense, the possibility that a man might have grown up as a girl and woman rarely, if ever, will enter the minds of cismen and ciswomen engaging in social interactions.

Interactions with Children

In transitioning from female-to-male, research participants describe an unexpected shift in their interactions with other people’s children. Transmen explain that they must be extremely cautious when they interact with children because there are different expectations for men and women in how they should behave with children.

When participants lived as social women, they interacted with children as women do. That is, they could be caring, sensitive, and nurturing towards children through verbal and physical interaction. Now that others perceive them to be men, they fear that if they interact with children as they once did (as social women), others will find the behavior to be inappropriate. Transmen use their knowledge of appropriate and inappropriate gendered behavior to navigate encounters with children.

Liam: One of the weirdest things that I've noticed is around kids, where (pause) like if you are at the grocery store and there is a kid crying for their mom, I can't help them. I can't take their hand and say, "Let's find your mom" because that is just not acceptable behavior for a male as far as pedophiles and kidnappers and all of those kinds of things. I've run into that a couple of times where I want to help the kid but I can't take their hand and help them find their mom.

Interviewer: You can't do it the same way that a woman could?

Liam: As a female, that is what you're supposed to do. That is what (my partner) would do in a second. We would have to help that kid find their mom or do whatever. Even helping a kid tie their shoe in the park—I can't do that as a male without putting myself at risk in a way.

In this example, we gain insight into what Liam believes to be appropriate and inappropriate gendered behavior for both men and women. As Liam explains, an expectation exists that when a child is in need of help, a woman *should* come to that child's aid and she should do so in a way that is both comforting and caring. According to Liam, this same type of behavior is "not acceptable behavior for a male." Not only is this type of behavior inappropriate for men, it could potentially put transmen at risk in that other people may view them as pedophiles or kidnappers. This fear of others labeling them as a potential threat to children was consistent across all interviews with transmen. Similarly, Williams (1992) finds that men working in traditionally feminine careers such

as elementary school teachers acknowledge that they are sometimes at risk for others identifying them as potential threats to children. Respondents are highly aware of what the perception is of men who interact with children that are not their own, especially if they interact in a way that is not coded as appropriate for their perceived gender. Zane describes a moment that he and a female friend were at the beach and were approached by some young children who wanted to play with them:

I had this moment where I was like, "I'm a guy in the water, with someone else's young children"—especially looking a bit queer. I realized this is not safe for me. Even if I try to play with these kids, there might be this dad that freaks out. I know what the perception is of single and maybe queer looking men playing with young kids. People don't look at that and think that it is cute. They look at the predator going after their children. I wasn't there with a female partner. It's not like I'm a straight guy in a couple that is going to be a great dad someday. I am a single, potentially predatory guy. My heart sank when I realized that. I got out of the water really quickly even though I wanted to stay in. My friend got out and wanted to know why I left. I explained that "I'm the dude in the water that those kids want to play with," and she was like, "Oh yeah, I didn't even think about that. Shit! You're *that* guy."

Zane's story sheds light on how our society perceives men as potential threats to children. However, this particular story is further complicated in that it displays the importance of perceived sexuality as well. Zane explains that if he were obviously coupled with a woman and did not appear to be "a little bit queer," others would consider him to be less of a threat. In his view, men who appear to be heterosexually coupled are less threatening than men who others read as gay or queer. Although Zane was with a female friend, he believes that he is noticeably queer-looking to others. Because he "looks gay," he does not think that other people would view him as coupled with his female friend. While the presence of a female may deter assumptions of pedophilia for heterosexual men, it may not work as well for men who do not appear to be heterosexual.

In a sense, they are more threatening than are heterosexual men. This assumption points to the tendency of our culture to favor certain kinds of men—specifically, those men that do masculinity appropriately (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995). That is, they must appear to be masculine *and* heterosexual. Those men that fail to do masculinity in this way receive a label of “deviant.” Such practices are consistent with our culture’s obsession with enforcing heteronormative ideologies which purport that heterosexuality is the only form of acceptable and natural sexual expression (Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). People perceive alternative forms of sexuality as inappropriate or potentially threatening.

While gay or queer men may appear more threatening to children because of the stigma associated with their sexual orientation, *all* men, regardless of perceived sexual orientation, might appear with suspicions that they could be predators. Once again, different expectations exist for men and women with respect to how they should behave around and interact with children. While we expect men to avoid interactions with children who are not their own, we rely on women to serve as the caretakers of children, even those children who are not their own. Those individuals who act outside of these predetermined roles run the risk of having their character questioned. For men who interact with children that are not their own; others may identify them as potential sexual predators of children.

In talking with FtM participants, I was able to identify multiple strategies that they use to safeguard against the potential risk of receiving the label of “predator.” The simplest way to avoid such a label is to avoid personal interactions with children

altogether. However, such a task is not easy since it is almost inevitable that transmen will have to, at some point, interact with a child. In these cases transmen can make sure that someone else is present, preferably a woman, who can, as Liam suggested, take the hand of the child and help them as expected. Another strategy is to make extra efforts to display to the parents of the child or other adults present that they are not a threat. Zane explained that he has a puppy that children consistently want to play with. He makes a point to make direct eye contact and smile at the parents to show them that he is “safe.” Additionally, he will often ask the parents if it is okay that the child pets his dog. He feels that this gives the parents an “out” if they need it.

Each of these strategies relies on the underlying awareness that transmen (and *all* men) are at risk for others perceiving them as potential predators. Without this knowledge, transmen would not be able to negotiate these interactions as easily. Therefore, transmen must use caution when encountering interactions with other people’s children so as to avoid any negativity or stigmatization. The transmen in this study are not only aware of the perceived threat of men towards children, but they are also aware of the expected role that women must play when interacting with children. Ultimately, their understanding of how men and women should act exemplifies our cultural tendency to organize social interactions around perceived gender.

Once transmen begin passing as social men, they lose the benefits of being a woman. That is, they lose the freedom to express themselves as being emotional, have more meaningful conversations and connections, express more intimate body language without being labeled sexist or a pervert; and act caring/nurturing to children who are not

their own without running the risk of being labeled a predator. Such findings contradict certain readings of female-to-male transitions which focus on the benefits that transmen acquire through transitioning while avoiding detailed discussions of the losses they experience (Dozier 2005; Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Although there are certainly benefits and privileges that transmen gain when they transition and become recognizable men, they also lose the benefits of womanhood and the freedom to act as women do. Through the female-to-male transition process, we can begin to understand the differences in policing of gendered behavior. In many respects, women have much more freedom with respect to how they dress and behave in social settings. As transmen lose their statuses as social women, they also lose the freedom to engage in activities they find to be fulfilling as communicative beings. This can lead to transmen feeling as if they are missing out on meaningful connections and conversations with other social actors. This sense of loss is only one form of loss that transmen experience. In the next chapter, I identify and describe multiple forms of loss that transmen and their partners experience. Through the following discussion, it becomes clear that while the transition process provides transmen with the ability to be who they have always wanted to be (social men); the new social status they take on is subject to societal pressures and policing consistent with gendered norms and values.

CHAPTER 6

LOST IN TRANSITION

In the last chapter, I described how transmen must relearn how to do gender as social men. Through the transition process, transmen begin to look more like men which causes other people to hold them accountable for doing gender correctly (West and Zimmerman 1987). As transmen perform gender in ways that are consistent with dominant notions of masculinity, they begin to pass, often as heterosexual men. Passing in this way creates several consequences for both transmen and partners of transmen. Now that transmen look like “straight” men, they and their female partners appear to be heterosexual couples. This causes transmen, their existing partners, and their former partners to lose their visibility within the queer community. That is, now that they “read” as heterosexual, they are not easily recognizable as members of the LGBTQA community. Even when they do identify themselves as part of the LGBTQA community, some study participants feel that they are not welcomed in the same way that they once were when others read them as lesbian or as a part of a queer couple. Ultimately, this change creates strong feelings of loss for both transmen and their partners.

In addition to lost visibility and connection to the LGBTQA community, partners of transmen report feeling several types of loss as their FtM-identified partner begins to transition. Partners of transmen explain that transitioning causes FtMs to change physically, mentally, and emotionally. Interestingly, some partners attribute the changes to the administration of testosterone, thereby embracing a highly essentialist understanding of sex and gender expression. Partners of FtMs further describe feelings of

loss, grief, and betrayal as their transitioning partner changes in fundamental ways. As partners experience these emotions, they find themselves performing extensive emotion work (Hochschild 1979) within their relationships, pointing to the existence of a gendered power dynamic in relationships where one partner identifies as transgender. The transition process itself, rather than the newly acquired gender status of transmen, appears to require partners of transmen to perform higher levels of emotion work than their transitioning partners.

Throughout this chapter, I describe the multiple forms of loss that transmen and partners of transmen experience as a direct result of transitioning and passing in a heteronormative culture. While both individuals in these relationships experience some form of loss, partners of transmen are more likely than transmen to express loss when discussing their experiences. This finding is not surprising, considering that transmen intentionally pursue the transition process in order to become the person they have always wanted to be. Partners of FtMs, on the other hand, may find that changes caused by the transition process lead to feelings of grief stemming from the loss of their formerly female-bodied partners. Transmen *also* experience loss, although in interviews, transmen voice less emotional distress and identify fewer forms of loss than their partners and former partners. Although I begin with a discussion of the losses experienced by both parties in my study, I focus more attention on partners' losses because they placed greater emphasis on this theme in their narratives.

Visibility

As transmen transition, they become more masculine and appear to be cismen (biologically male) to others. When others read a transman as a cisman, he “passes.” This process leads to transmen becoming invisible in that outsiders do not acknowledge them as transmen, but as “regular men” who were born biologically male and socially gendered as men. In other words, the more likely transmen are to pass *as social men*, the more likely they will also lose their visibility *as transmen*. Before transitioning, the FtM transpersons were part of a larger queer community. The former lesbians were invested in the queer community, personally identified as members of the queer community, and based their social networks within the queer community. In some cases, as transmen lose their visibility as masculine or androgynous women, they lose their connection to the queer community. For example, Halberstam (1998b) explains that many transmen wish to maintain their ties to queer and lesbian communities after transitioning. While some transmen want to pass as heterosexual cismen, others do not have this same desire.

Likewise, of the four transmen that I interviewed for this study, all indicated that they prefer to identify as transmen rather than cismen. The transgender portion of transmen’s identities is significant in shaping who they are and how they want others to see them. Participants explain that when others read them as “regular” (and presumably heterosexual) men, they are not seen for who they truly are. Liam describes how others perceive him and his partner and the problems that it poses:

Interviewer: So do most people perceive you as a heterosexual male and you and your wife as a heterosexual couple?

Liam: Yeah.

Interviewer: Are you okay with that? Do you want to appear to others as a specific type of person or couple?

Liam: It kind of depends on the situation. I don't really feel like I'm being authentic when people see us as a straight couple. I don't think it honors the journey that I've been on and the composition of my life. We went through struggles that most people can't understand. I'm not saying other people don't struggle but it is just kind of like, I'm a sensitive guy and that is probably because I was socialized female—those kinds of things. To really get to know your friends and co-workers, you can't just pretend that none of that happened.

According to Liam, people can never truly get to know him and understand who he is if they identify him as a heterosexual male in a heterosexual relationship. He recognizes that he was socialized as a girl, something quite different from being socialized as a boy. As previously indicated, our culture uses essentialist notions about sex and gender to determine who a person can become and who we teach them to be. We designate those born “male” to be boys and those born “female” to be girls. From the moment of designation, an individual receives gender specific socialization that will aid them in fitting into our existing heteronormative gender structure (Lorber 1994; Lorber and Moore 2007; Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2010; Schwalbe 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987; Wharton 2005). Liam and the other transmen interviewed were raised and socialized to become girls and women (de Beauvoir 2009 [1949]). In viewing transmen as “regular guys,” their life experiences and journeys as transmen are not identifiable or fully appreciated.

Several scholars note the importance of visibility for transmen and the trans-community. Many believe that by being visible, transmen possess the ability to subvert

existing heteronormative assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler 2004; Green 2005; Lorber and Moore 2007; Namaste 1996; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Scholars also argue that the mere presence of individuals who differ from our traditional sex and gender binaries point to the illegitimacy of our existing binary structure (Butler 2004; Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Solomon 1993). However, many transmen blend into the existing gender structure rather than stand out from it. Some scholars criticize the transmen and transwomen for “passing” because they believe that passing serves to reinforce the existing gender structure rather than subvert it (Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). However, as Pfeffer (2009:179) points out, “It is irresponsible to place a disproportionate burden on those who are trans-identified (and, by extension, their partners) for reforming the entire gendered social order.” Other scholars in the field support this statement (Serano 2007; Wentling, Windsor, Schilt, and Lucal 2008).

While these scholars may be accurate in their assumptions that passing reinforces heteronormative standards, not all transmen wish to pass as men, especially as heterosexual men, and become invisible as queer or as transmen. In fact, all of the transmen I interviewed expressed frustrations with becoming invisible as well as a common desire to be seen as trans, queer, or both. They struggled to remain visibly queer or trans in a culture that only identifies two existing sex and gender categories. For example, Zane, a FtM transperson, describes how his partner (also FtM-identified) had difficulty receiving recognition in a way that is consistent with his gender identity and expression:

He (Zane's partner) started presenting more like a guy because he wasn't trying to be masculine, like, he's not. He was being read, he was attempting to present as a feminine guy. That is something I saw and validated and other people did, but most people would read him as an artsy woman or an androgynous woman. People weren't reading him as male.

Zane's partner is still female-bodied at this time. However, at the time of this story, Zane's partner had begun using male pronouns and trying to present himself as a man, albeit, a feminine man. Because Zane's partner retained his female sex characteristics, simply dressing or presenting "like a guy" was not sufficient to cause others to identify him as male. Other individuals continued to read Zane's partner as a woman.

As Lucal (1999) explains, people will do gender for others no matter what they do or how they present themselves. If a person has "masculine" attributes, others will label that individual as a man. If a person has "feminine" attributes, others will label that individual as a woman. Such designations occur without reference to an individual's actual biological makeup. Through transitioning, FtM transpersons begin to possess characteristics that our society deems "masculine." Because only two gender categories are recognizable, transmen typically receive the designation of "man" even if the designation is "gay" man. Such practices exemplify the heteronormative beliefs and assumptions that guide dominant understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. However, in the case of Zane's partner trying to present as "male," he lacked the "masculine" traits necessary to warrant a male designation from others. When this story took place, Zane's partner had not had any hormonal treatments or surgical procedures. Therefore, he did not have male secondary sex characteristics. Dozier (2005) explains that secondary sex characteristics serve as the primary indicators of sex and gender.

Loss of Queer Community and Identity

In losing their visibility as transmen, FtM transpersons also lose their visibility as members of a larger queer community. This is true for both transmen and their partners. When transmen pass as men, their relationships are read in a way that reflects the perceived genders of both partners. Since the majority of partners in this study identify and present as women, most respondents indicated that they typically read to others as being a part of a heterosexual couple. This type of reading applies in both heterosexual and queer spaces. In separate interviews, Nicole and Liam, who are married to one another, describe how they were received as a couple when going to queer spaces and events:

Nicole: Part of me wishes that there was some kind of identification because it would make things more clear for people. As far as what our relationship is and what those interests for me are. But also, even going to—we've gone to Pride and gay events and people look at us like we have three heads, like, "What are you guys doing here? I don't get it. Why are *you* volunteering?" We tell them that we are part of the community and they just don't get it. Even if we were a straight couple, allies are supposed to be a part of the community. It is just kind of like, we are viewed as outsiders in that way.

Liam: About a year or so, we decided we needed to be a part of the community. Last year, we volunteered for Pride. It was really hard because people were like, "What are you doing here? You don't belong here." We get that attitude towards us a lot. I would come out and say, "I'm trans," but the queer community and trans-community don't always get the support from the gay and lesbian community because a lot of them are transphobic. We also volunteered for the AIDS walk and were like, "We are a part of the community," and they were like "What community?" That was kind of rough.

Through these examples, Nicole and Liam display how they now feel invisible *within* the queer community. Now that Liam passes as a man, some gay and lesbian communities

identify Liam and his partner, Nicole, as a heterosexual couple rather than a queer couple. Their presumed heterosexual identities create questions around their motives for participating in and being present at queer events. Nicole points out that even if they were straight, they should still be welcomed into queer spaces. Several LGBTQA groups include an “A” in their acronym in order to denote the presence and acceptance of allies within the group. However, the experiences of Nicole and Liam indicate that some LGBTQA communities may not be as accepting of allies as they claim to be.

Additionally, Liam explains that once he identifies himself as trans and, therefore, a part of the queer community, he does not always feel welcome because he believes that transphobia exists within the gay and lesbian communities. This exclusion of transpersons from the gay and lesbian community is not a new practice. Transgender individuals and bisexuals commonly experience negative reactions from some gay and lesbian communities (Gamson 1995; Halberstam 1998b; Kendel, Devor, and Strapko 1997). In an analysis of editorial debates printed in the *San Francisco Bay Times* between 1991 and 1993, Gamson (1995) finds that lesbians blatantly rejected both bisexuals and male-to-female transpersons because lesbians did not believe them to be “real lesbians” or “real women” who were worthy of a lesbian identity.

Similarly, Kendel, Devor, and Strapko (1997) also find anti-trans attitudes to be prevalent among lesbians and feminists surveyed at various feminist and women’s only events. However, they also find that lesbians who know or are acquainted with transpersons tend to have more positive attitudes than those lesbians who do not have such affiliations. Ultimately, transcouples are not easily identifiable as belonging to the

queer community. Furthermore, even when they do out themselves to others, there is no guarantee that traditional gay and lesbian communities will openly embrace them due to potential transphobia or distrust of transpersons (Gamson 1995; Halberstam 1998b; Kendel, Devor, and Strapko 1997).

This loss of LGBTQA identification proves to be extremely disheartening for individuals from the trans-community. Partners of transmen repeatedly explained the sense of loss they have from lack of recognition as queer or lesbian-identified individuals. Susan describes the pain that stems from being a lesbian-identified person involved with a transman:

Interviewer: Is it important to you or both of you to be perceived by others as a queer couple?

Susan: I know it is for me. I don't expect it to happen because it won't, but it is sad. It is a grief, a loss for me. I like being read as a dyke. I like being read as a lesbian by everybody. I was activist as you can be. I didn't mind being out as a lesbian. I was married to a woman for several years and we were very open and kind of out there—part of the very short-lived queer nation group. So, that was part of who I was—to be very visibly lesbian. Being with James has been various stages of losing that ability—if I'm with him. If I went off to a lesbian bar, I could doll it up and be a lesbian in no time because that is who I am. But if I am with him or known to be with him, it is just not going to fly. That was a real loss for me. I think I've come to more of an acceptance now. It is always a bit of a pain in my heart. It is a little part that is incongruent for me—just not in keeping with who I am in spirit. It is kind of a trade-off. I love this person. I love *James*. He is the best partner that I could imagine. Really, I got a prize with him. He is great. One thing is he is not a woman. What can I say? He is a great guy! I think that is painful for him, but I don't know that it is as soul-killing for him as it is for me. It pains me to not be known as lesbian. That is kind of a bittersweet prospect of our relationship.

According to Susan, simply being in a relationship with someone who is trans and appears as a man to others causes her to lose her visibility as a lesbian. Despite this loss of visibility, she continues to self-identify a lesbian who is a part of a larger lesbian community.

Several other partners in this study indicate that they maintain their sexual identities despite their being in a relationship with a transman. This tendency is consistent with Pfeffer's (2008) study on women partners of transmen who continued to identify as lesbians even though they were in relationships with transmen who did not identify as females or as women. As Zane, a transman himself, puts it, "My identity does not hinge on whether or not (his partner at the time) transitions." Zane's sexual identity does not shift simply because his partner chooses to transition from woman to man. Similarly, Mel explains, "I still feel like a queer femme—my partner is trans, but that is who I am. That is who I was before he transitioned and that is who I am now." Both of these respondents acknowledge that their being in relationships with individuals who identify as trans does not influence how they choose to identify with respect to sexual orientation. As Ochs (1996) points out, our society tends to categorize an individual's sexual orientation based on the sexed body of their current partner. These narratives indicate that one's sexual identity is not dependent upon the physical (sexed) body of one's current partner, but rather something that can remain consistent despite the changing physical body of an intimate partner. Societal definitions of human sexuality often depend on the bodies and genders of those individuals with whom we are intimate. According to these respondents,

such societal definitions are not always the case. Despite the shifting identities and bodies of their trans-partners, some participants maintain their sexual identities.

While Susan continues to identify as a lesbian, she also describes the pain that she experiences for not receiving the recognition that she once did—when she was in visible lesbian relationships. She explains that being visible is also a part of her identity. By being in a relationship with someone who passes as a man, she loses that part of her identity. She describes it as both “soul-killing” and a “trade-off” for being in a relationship with someone she truly loves. This someone also happens to not be a woman anymore. For her, the loss that she experiences is something that she must accept if she wants to remain in a relationship with James, the transman that she loves.

Additional consequences exist for women who choose to remain in relationships with transmen. According to Karen, not only does she lose her queer visibility, she also loses the equal status that she once held with her partner.

Karen: One of the things that I don't know that I'll ever be able to accept or that has been really hard for me is that we are viewed by society as a heterosexual couple, you know, male-female... The hard part is being a white woman with a white guy who is given male privilege on a platter every day of his life. It is really hard for me.

Interviewer: Yeah, you mentioned that. In what ways have you seen or what ways do you think he receives male privilege?

Karen: When he gets up in the morning when he gets out of bed! (Laughs) No, I'm just kidding. One of the first times I noticed it, I started crying. We were in the truck together and he asked me what was the matter. I told him that I was upset that six months ago before he transitioned, at the time we were equally discriminated against. There was some sort of camaraderie in that in our relationship. He became this white male and I'm the one who is the female and I felt like he went up the ladder and I went down. My view of the world is that women in heterosexual relationships end up being treated differently because they are paired with white men. He started getting treated differently when we went to

restaurants. They always talk to him first. They always ask him for me. They would disregard me. Or sometimes, other men would give him this nod of approval like, "Yeah, your woman is hot." It made me want to puke, seriously. It was awful—feeling like I became somewhat more invisible because I was with a man. I didn't like that. It felt like I was going backwards. It was really uncomfortable for me.

Karen, who now appears to be in a heterosexual relationship, has lost status as her partner's equal within the patriarchal system—she is now inhabiting the proverbial lesser half of the relationship. According to Karen, heterosexual women have less status and power in their relationships than do lesbian or queer women who have relationships that are more egalitarian. The perception of her being in a relationship with a white, heterosexual male, in her opinion, causes her to be less visible as a *human being* in a culture that caters to white men over men of color and women. This lack of visibility causes others to interact with her as though she is a heterosexual woman partnered with a heterosexual man. This treatment, she argues, is different from the treatment she and her partner received when they presented as a lesbian couple. She also points to the "nod of approval" men now give her partner (Lucal 1999). She believes that this behavior communicates that he (her partner) has done well in acquiring an attractive female partner. If this is the case, her partner now receives recognition from other men for "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) successfully in that he appears to be in a heterosexual relationship with an attractive woman.

Visibility is an important part of participants' queer identities. By being visible, they convey disruptive messages to the dominant culture (Butler 2004; Green 2005; Lorber and Moore 2007; Lucal 1999; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Solomon 1993). In describing her experiences of being in a relationship with a transman, Mel identifies

multiple frustrations with losing her visibility as a partner of a butch lesbian. For Mel, being visible is a political act in that it enables her to challenge heteronormative notions of appropriate and attractive gender expressions:

I really struggled with becoming invisible as a queer person, more so than I had been before. People were seeing him the way that he felt inside and for me, it was a loss of something that I was really proud of, which was being with a butch. And I still feel really strongly about—you know that butch women are told from as far back as they can remember that they are the wrong kind of girl or women, they are freaks, they are ugly, they are not right. And being with a butch was a way to let the world know that I don't find this gender identity ugly or wrong. I find it sexy. I find it attractive.

When transmen begin passing as men, their female partners find themselves in presumably heterosexual relationships. For Mel, being in this position is incredibly disheartening because she is no longer easily identifiable as someone who resists heterosexual prescriptions of gender and sexuality. She instead appears to be someone who conforms to such prescriptions. Ultimately, individuals who were once visible “resisters” of the dominant heteronormative culture find themselves looking as though they are now a part of that culture.

When discussing the loss that they experience, several participants pointed to strategies that they use in order to maintain some level of visibility. The most common strategy is to be vocal and come out to others. By letting other people know that they are trans or in a relationship with a transperson, they become visible again. However, because they blend in so well to the dominant gender structure, participants often find themselves in a continuous cycle of coming out. This strategy is similar to that of

individuals with Celiac disease¹³ (CD), who must practice “everyday activism” and come out as having CD so as to make others aware of their status (Copelton forthcoming). Celiac disease, like other “invisible” medical or bodily conditions, is not something that is readily apparent to others. Therefore, individuals that have CD find themselves in constant state of outing themselves so as to protect themselves from potentially ingesting gluten-based food or drink that might cause them dangerous physical harm.

As transmen and partners of transmen meet new people and enter new spaces, they must also out themselves repeatedly in order to remain visible. This strategy can become incredibly exhausting for participants who explain that they must negotiate when they should or should not be vocal about their identities. Several respondents indicated that rather than being in a perpetual state of coming out to everyone, they are selective about who they come out to and when it is an appropriate time to come out. This form of selective disclosure is common for any individual or group that has a stigmatized status (Krieger 1996).

Mel explains that she no longer finds it necessary to come out to “every person on the street” but only to those people “who needed to know.” Mel and most other participants do not care as much about how strangers perceive them, but they do find it necessary to be out to those individuals with whom they have close or working relationships. Other strategies, which may not be as overt, are maintaining involvement with the queer community, attending queer events, and identifying oneself as LGBTQA through symbols such as rainbow stickers.

¹³ Celiac disease is “an auto-immune disorder triggered by gluten, a protein in wheat, barley, and rye.” (Copelton forthcoming:1)

Mel later points out that while being invisible certainly has its problems, it can also serve as a tool to challenge dominant ideas and beliefs about the trans-community. She recognizes that appearing straight has benefits in that she can resist heteronormative ideas from a presumed ally perspective:

There is a certain power that allies have at times. To call—so as an anti-racist ally, as a white person I can say, “Hey, that’s not cool actually.” It will sometimes have more of an impact than if a person of color did it because a person of color can just be dismissed. I don’t know if that is making sense outside of my head. There is also like, if I am seen as a queer ally instead of queer myself, I might actually be heard in a different way. I think that there’s also—like that is also something I can think about. I don’t need to be out to everyone in order to still be who I am and have an impact.

In this statement, Mel recognizes the power that comes with being perceived as a heterosexual who is supportive of the trans-community. If people read her as queer, they may be less likely to hear her objections or standpoint because she would be a part of the discriminated group. In this case, a queer perspective is presumed to be biased, and therefore, less worthy of consideration. If she appears to be heterosexual and thus, a member of the dominant group who is supportive of the rights of that group, other individuals might be more willing to listen to her and accept what she says as being valid. According to Ji (2007:180), allies are in a position to help non-LGBTQA individuals “resolve their biases” as well as aid in disproving common “myths and misconceptions of the LGBT [sic] community that are held by the majority of society.” In this way, Mel can take advantage of her invisibility as a queer person and use her presumed heterosexual status as a resource to educate others on queer and trans-issues.

Losing the Woman He Once Was

In this section, I discuss how the changes that transmen undergo create emotional responses in their partners. I find that changes prompted by the transition process lead to emotion work (Hochschild 1979) which partners of transmen must perform. This emotion work consists of appearing supportive of the transition and FtM partners despite sometimes feeling negatively towards the physical and emotional changes caused by transitioning. As the bodies of transmen become more like those of men, partners of transmen sometimes long for their trans-partners' formerly female bodies. For instance, when transmen begin growing facial hair or have their breasts removed, partners of transmen may mourn the loss of "femaleness." As partners experience this loss, they feel that they must suppress their emotions, thereby doing extensive emotion work to appear supportive of the transition.

The transition process significantly changes the bodies of transmen. As transmen begin taking hormones and acquiring reconstructive surgeries, their bodies shift away from "the feminine" and towards "the masculine." In other words, their biologically female bodies begin to look like the bodies of males as they acquire male secondary sex characteristics. As they transition, they grow more hair, their voices deepen, their chests look like those of men with chest reconstruction, and in some cases, they experience clitoral growth as they take testosterone (causing the clitoris to look like a small penis). As previously mentioned, the purpose of the transition process is to align one's body with one's mind. Transpersons feel a disconnection between their genders and their sexed

bodies. More specifically, FtM transpersons feel at odds with their physically female bodies. Through transitioning, they are able to bring their bodies and minds in alignment. Respondents indicate that transmen welcome the changes that accompany transitioning. Liam, for instance, explains how he felt after his chest surgery:

It was *such* a relief. It was like a huge weight had been lifted. I could start doing things that I had not been able to do like, you can't work out very easily when you have a chest and you are not supposed to and you're not wearing many clothes when you're working out. I could go to the gym, which was great. I could go swimming which was awesome. I'm not a huge swimmer, but just to be able to go to the beach or the water park or wherever I wanted to go and just be more in the world where I wanted to be, it was just a huge relief. It was like, "Thank god those are gone!"

James also explains how transitioning has made him more comfortable in living his daily life:

The biggest difference is that I feel that I am who I need to be. I am myself now. I don't agonize on a daily basis on who am I and what are these feelings? It is as though there are no more layers to peel back which is really nice. When you take one layer off and there is more crap there, it is just like "Ugh! When is this going to stop?" I just feel like there aren't any more layers.

As transmen modify their bodies in ways that are consistent with the bodies of biological men, the disconnection between their gender identity and physical (sexed) body begins to dissipate. In a sense, they come to feel as if their minds and bodies "match." Again, as stated in previous chapters, this thinking is in line with heteronormative assumptions that suggest that there are in fact matching bodies and genders (Kitzinger 2005; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Because transmen often identify as men rather than women, they wish to construct a body that appears male. Transmen, like all social actors receive socialization that claims physical sexed bodies have a corresponding gender. As transmen

construct their bodies, they conform to heteronormative ideologies (Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

While transmen often desire to have bodies that appear male, their partners sometimes have ambiguous feelings about the new changes. These feelings are somewhat comparable to the experiences of married heterosexual men who must cope with the emotional and physical changes of their pregnant wives (Greenberg 2008). While the changes that pregnant women undergo do not cause husbands to confront their sexual identities as they do in the case of partners of transmen, changing pregnant bodies *can* create a shift in how husbands view and think about their wives sexually (Greenberg 2008). Similar to relationships with a transitioning partner, the changing body of one partner can create stress within the relationship.

The majority of partners identify themselves as queer, indicating that they may be more open with respect to the differently gendered bodies of their trans-identified partners. However, most partners also expressed some form of loss or sadness regarding their trans-partners' changing bodies. Partners in this study entered relationships with transmen who initially possessed female bodies. While most partners identified themselves as "queer," many indicated that they are primarily attracted to women's bodies. Because of this, partners often experience feelings of loss or even moments of grief for the partner that they initially began their relationship with. Partners indicate that the transition process drastically alters the bodies, minds, and emotional capacities of their trans-partners—often causing them to feel as if their relationships have changed in significant ways.

Partners of transmen also find themselves in positions where they must confirm their desire to be in a relationship with a transitioning partner, who may feel as though his body is no longer sexually appealing. This can be difficult for partners who remain physically and emotionally attracted to their partners while simultaneously feeling negatively towards those physical and emotional changes. Partners of transmen further serve as emotional support throughout the transition process, which can be emotionally and physically strenuous for both individuals. Pfeffer (2009, 2010) contends that women partners of transmen do more housework and put more emotion work into their relationships than do their trans-identified partners. Therefore, couples in Pfeffer's research mirror heterosexual relationships where women perform more emotion work and household labor than men do. Such relationships lead to an unequal distribution of work and thus, power (Hochschild 1989; Hochschild and Machung 2005).

While I did not discuss housework with respondents, partners of transmen described their tendency to perform substantially more emotion work within their relationships. The majority of partners (six out of seven) identify as female and as women, while one partner (Zane) is also a FtM transperson. Zane *did* discuss an extensive amount of emotion work that he put into the relationship with respect to supporting a trans-partner who was considering transitioning. This indicates that while there is most likely a gendered power dynamic that exists between transmen and women partners of transmen, the transition process itself requires partners to put in significant amounts of emotion work in that they serve as the transitioning FtM's support system.

Of the seven partners interviewed, four consistently reported feeling a sense of loss due to the transition of their trans-partners. Interestingly, three partners did not describe emotional losses in the same way. Of the three partners not experiencing emotional losses, one was a transman who more recently dates mostly transmen, one had a partner who has not yet begun taking hormones or having surgeries, and the last partner explains that she is attracted to both men and women and had only been in heterosexual relationships prior to her relationship with her trans-partner. The remaining four participants currently and previously identified as female and as lesbian or queer individuals who are primarily attracted to women's bodies. They are also currently in or were previously in relationships with transmen who have begun transitioning and passing as men. I believe that the four partners who express significant loss do so because they are individuals who primarily desire women's bodies, and in some cases, because they miss the emotional bond they once shared *as women* with their formerly female-bodied partners. Those participants who do express feelings of loss, explain that as their partners take testosterone and have reconstructive surgeries, their partners change both physically *and* emotionally.

Physical Changes

The changing physical bodies of transmen are perhaps the most obvious because they are visibly apparent. Transmen take hormonal supplements or testosterone in order to masculinize their bodies and voices. To further construct themselves as transmen, some have chest or genital reconstructive surgeries. Individuals who might have previously appeared as masculine women acquire "male" secondary sex characteristics

causing them to pass as biological men (Dozier 2005). Some partners observing the physical changes find that they have trouble immediately embracing the new bodies and physical traits of their trans-partners. Karen explains her initial reaction to her trans-partner's changing body:

The first thing that happened was that he had facial hair. Surprise! It was way more fun for me when we would goof around and draw it on his face with eyeliner than when it was really stubbly gross hair. Honestly. That is when I realized that this was for real. This is really going to happen where he is going to be in the male body that he finally wants to be in. Here he is counting every single hair as it grows on his face. I'm like, "Oh my god! I'm never going to touch that soft face again," which is something that I really liked and I realized, for me, was where it fit for me sexually.

Here Karen indicates that while she was able to enjoy the fantasy or the idea of him being a man, she was less welcoming of the real life physical changes once they began to occur. As Halberstam (1998b:294) explains, "Masculinity within some lesbian contexts presents a problem when it becomes too 'real' or when some imaginary line has been crossed between play and seriousness." When Karen's partner began to grow his own facial hair, his masculine identity moved from the realm of fantasy into something that was real and concrete. Such a realization could be difficult to accept for an individual who is sexually attracted to a more feminine body. In this example, Karen realizes for the first time that her trans-identified partner would no longer have the woman's body that she found sexually appealing. For example, Karen refers to the actual hair as "stubbly gross hair." This language tells us that not only did she *not* welcome this new physical change in her partner, but also that she was somewhat disgusted by it. While her partner became excited and embraced the changes, she ruminated on the fact that she would never touch his soft face ever again. For her, him having a softer, and presumably more feminine body, is

what she found to be sexually appealing. When he lost his softness, she lost the ability to be attracted to him in the way that she always had been. This type of loss can be incredibly devastating for an individual who desires a specific type of body (in this case, female) but then realizes that the person she loves will never have that type of body again.

Similarly, Susan describes the sense of loss that she felt when her partner's body shifted away from that of a female and towards a "male" body:

I really liked his female body. He had a great female body and so...I was very attracted to that and sad when the testosterone actually was what he started and it started to change his breasts. The fat went out of them or redistributed. I kind of mourned that. It was like, "Oh, I really liked them." His female body...and when his weight distributed, it was different. I love women's bodies and although I am very attracted to him, he doesn't have a woman's body anymore. So that was a challenge too. I definitely felt a sense of loss that physical female connection, especially with top surgery. That was kind of the final, "Okay, it's gone, we're done."

As Susan indicates, testosterone alters the physical bodies of transmen in that it changes a once female form into a body that appears like that of a male. Some of these changes are muscle and hair growth, lowering of the voice, redistribution of body weight, or the thickening of the face and body. For Susan's partner James, taking testosterone redistributed his weight. This included a shift in his breasts' appearance. As James' breasts became less breast-like, Susan felt a strong sense of loss, so much that she explains that she "mourned" the loss of his breasts. Susan, a self-identified lesbian, consistently describes herself as being attracted to women and women's bodies. Because of this strong identity and desire for women and women's bodies, she struggled to cope with her partner's bodily changes. As a lesbian-identified individual, she desires to have a

female-bodied partner. While she began this relationship with someone who had a woman's body, her partner now has the body of a transman: he has been on testosterone for approximately eight years, he has had chest reconstruction as well as a hysterectomy, and he desires to have bottom surgery. She explains that she has lost both the woman's body he once had as well as the physical connection they once shared as women.

While Susan's partner James now lacks a woman's body, she does explain that she *is* still attracted to him. As mentioned previously, most partners still desire the bodies of their trans-partners. The sexual desire that many partners feel for their trans-partners has shifted in that they do not desire their trans-partners as if they are women. Although some study participants reported that they were no longer in their relationships, neither transmen or former partners of transmen spoke of loss in terms of the relationship itself.

Mel was able to cope with the changes since she had been in relationships with cismen prior to dating her current trans-identified partner. Mel explains:

There are things when I first kissed a girl, I was like, 'Oh, no stubble. That is nice. I don't get a rash after I neck with this person.' Now I have stubble again—that is fine. It is not a deal breaker...it is different. It is different when I was with him as a girl but it is the same as other men that I had been with.

Here Mel recognizes that being with her partner is now similar to how it was when she had relationships with men in that his body is more consistent with men's bodies than it is with women's bodies. In other words, she no longer desires him as if he is a woman, but rather as the more masculine individual that he has become.

Shifting one's sexual attractions can be difficult for those individuals who initially have a preference for a specific sexed or gendered body. In most cases, partners in this

study primarily¹⁴ desire women and women's bodies but they have to adjust their thinking with respect to what they are attracted to as their trans-partner goes through the transition process. This task is somewhat complicated because of the emphasis that our society places on sexed and gendered bodies with respect to sexual orientation. An analysis of the terms such as "homosexual" or "heterosexual" makes this apparent. Both terms describe one's sexual orientation and attraction as being defined by the physical sex and gendered appearance of potential mates. When an individual identifies as being of a particular orientation, they let others know they are attracted to individuals with a specific type of body and gender presentation. Partners of transmen also identify themselves as having a particular orientation or form of sexual attraction. When confronted with a partner who alters his physical body and gendered appearance in a way that differs from their orientation, partners of transmen may have to redefine what they find to be attractive or how they are attracted to their now masculine-bodied partners.

Redefining what one finds attractive can be something that partners of FtMs must constantly renegotiate throughout the transition process. Because transmen tend to transition in stages, partners sometimes have to handle each new change on its own. For example, Susan elaborates on how she would feel if James pursued further surgical reconstruction:

Interviewer: Regarding potential additional surgeries. Would you be okay with those changes and how do you feel about the possibility of clitoral release or testicular implants?

¹⁴ Recall that partners either identified themselves as being "queer" or "lesbian." The majority of queer identified individuals indicated that while they are open to dating anyone, regardless of sex or gender, they are primarily sexually attracted to women and women's bodies.

Susan: I have some ambivalence. A lot of my ambivalence is that we have friends who have had those surgeries and they haven't always been as successful as you want them to be. Part of me is just worried about whether or not it would work to James' satisfaction. But I kind of like what he has going on now. I'd be happy with him staying with his current genitalia but I don't think that it would ruin me if he changed. Again, the more happy he is with his body, the more happy he is in general and the funner he is to be around. So, that is a benefit emotionally for him and for me as a result. But, I'd be fine with him if he'd stay right where he is! (Laughs). It's like, that's cool. If he really felt that he had to do this, I would tell him to do what he needs to do. I hope that he never gets to the point where he feels he needs to have really radical surgery, because like I said, I worry about the difficulties with success with those kinds of surgeries and it is such a vital part of one's body.

While Susan confirms that she would find the new changes to James' body acceptable, she clearly indicates that she is currently happy with his body the way that it is, specifically with him keeping his existing female genitalia intact. Again, Susan is a self-identified lesbian who repeatedly stresses her sexual attraction towards women and women's bodies. She also previously stated that she had a hard time adjusting to his body once he had his breasts removed. For her, holding onto those "female" physical traits is important, but not as important as James' happiness with his own body. Susan's position sheds light on the tendency of relationships with transitioning partners to focus on the needs of the transitioning individual. This trend becomes even more apparent as I discuss the emotional consequences of transitioning and the emotion work that it leads to for partners of transmen.

Emotional Changes

Partners of transmen also explain that transitioning and taking hormones causes their trans-partners to go through emotional and mental changes. All respondents described a change in their own or their partners' emotions. Overall, transmen become

much happier with their bodies and their lives once they begin to appear more masculine and pass as men. However, several partners claim that taking testosterone led their trans-partners to change significantly in their mental and emotional capacities. These assertions are incredibly essentialist in that they indicate that “male hormones,” such as testosterone, create “masculine emotional and behavioral” responses in transmen. Their narratives indicate that they believe that hormones (something that is “natural” and based in biology) influence emotional capacities and individual behavior. Not all respondents attributed these changes to testosterone, but several mentioned the impact that testosterone has on their trans-identified partners. This finding indicates that while many respondents claim that the potential of human expression is fluid and infinite (as indicated in Chapter 4), some believe that nature (or biology) significantly shapes how one will act and react emotionally.

In the case of transmen, some of their partners explain that the administration of testosterone causes transmen to be more “like men” in that they now have the same mental and emotional expressions of biological men (cismen). The partners in this study believe that their trans-identified partners are less connected with their emotions as well as the emotions of others. Such thinking is consistent with essentialist notions of men as the less emotional and therefore, more rational gender. Once again, Susan explains the effect that testosterone has on her partner:

The other thing that blew me away was the power of testosterone. Holy crap! It was just staggering to see the changes that took place in him. Not just physically, although those have been pretty amazing, but mentally, emotionally. Just very fundamental ways that his brain and emotions work. They are not all *bad*, they are different. We used to talk about brain melt or mind melt. He would say these things that were just like WHAT? We still laugh about it. He will still say bone-

headed stuff. I'm like, "What? Is that the testosterone talking? What the hell?" He is like "Oh, I'm sorry, it's brain melt." It is kind of an obliviousness to emotional stuff that was never there before. We sort of laugh at it now. Yeah, it was just amazing. I had no idea of the power of hormones until he started taking them. I just, at that point I began to realize, or have sympathy for men who were born men, as well as transmen. There are certain things that testosterone is a freaking "toxin" as one of my friends talks about. It is just incredible. His way of relating emotionally has changed. He is certainly happier, but not as—he is not like a woman anymore in terms of being readily connected with emotions. They don't bubble up as freely as they used to.

According to Susan, testosterone can prevent both transmen and cismen from experiencing certain feelings and having deeper connections with others on an emotional level. Rather than attributing James' new behavior and emotional responses to changes in their relationship or potential social causes such as "doing gender" and conforming to social expectations of what it means to be a man, she asserts that James is fundamentally different specifically because he takes testosterone. Such justifications allow respondents to explain away the changes by pointing to presumed biological causes that they have less control over. Susan was by no means the only participant who spoke of the transformative impact of testosterone on emotions. In discussing the effects of testosterone on her partner, Mel explains:

The things that used to be really hard for him emotionally and the things that he would break down about, he just doesn't anymore—it is weird. I think some of it is the T. Like, it is harder for him to cry. Like if he was upset, I could help him get to a point where he could cry about it and then he could work through it. I can't really do that anymore. It is harder for him to just break down and cry since he has been on T.

In this example, Mel describes her partner as being unable to cry. However, she also seems to think that he should *want* to cry. It is highly plausible that her partner no longer felt the need to cry for things that used to be emotional for him because he is now happier

and more comfortable with himself. For many transmen, taking testosterone alters their bodies so that they become more masculine and, thus, more content with their physical bodies. In this way, testosterone may serve as a tool that prevents transmen from needing to cry as much as they did prior to transitioning. While this may be the case, some respondents seem to think that testosterone somehow blocks their abilities to connect emotionally. This thinking prevents respondents from considering the possibility that transmen may learn that crying or being emotional are not in line with expressions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). James, a transman, explains how he is emotionally different from how he used to be (prior to transitioning):

Emotionally, I feel less able to cry. I miss that. As the years have gone by, I feel like I've lost touch with the emotional feelings that I used to have because I don't have those anymore. I know that it is really different. I didn't keep a journal or anything but I did keep a little note to self and that is that male brains are different from female brains (laughs). I didn't want to believe that for the longest time, but it really is true. I just don't cry as easily as I did as if...like saying goodbye to (Partner) before she would leave to go away for a trip. I think before I transitioned I would cry tears and now it is just that I feel sad and I do miss her, but I'm not able to cry about that. So less emotional, I'm able to check my emotions easier—which isn't always good. Crying is a physical release and I felt better after I did and I just don't have that anymore.

According to James, transitioning has impeded his ability to connect with emotions or be emotional in the same way that he used to be when he was a woman. James finds this change to be indicative of the differences between male and female brains. In his view, the hormonal make up of an individual causes men and women to think and act differently. This perception differs from the experiences he discusses in the previous chapter, which focuses on the changing social interactions of transmen. In the last chapter, James and the other transmen discuss their desire to have *more* intimate and

emotional social interactions. They feel that they are internally more emotional than they are allowed to be when interacting and speaking with other people who do not know that they are transgender. Ultimately, they feel as if they have to have boring and less meaningful conversations because that is what others expect of them as men.

If we consider James' comments in the previous chapter along with the above quote, he presents conflicting views about the emotional tendencies of men and women. In Chapter 5, he acknowledges the role of socialization in being a man or woman. He also believes that his past as a social woman has provided him with the ability to be more emotionally connected. However, in the above quote he clearly indicates that men and women are naturally different—indicating that women are innately more emotional than men. James thus provides two different views of his capabilities as a transman. On the one hand, he explains that he is more similar to women in his emotional capacities and, on the other hand, he believes that he is no longer capable of being as emotional as he once was as a woman. This contradiction could stem from James' simultaneous desire to both be a man, yet have the freedom to express himself as he once did when others read him as a social woman. He is aware that he no longer has the same freedom of expression, but he is also learning how to be a man and what the expectations are for men as emotional beings.

In discussing the changes in her FtM partner, Karen explains how he has significantly changed, both physically and emotionally:

Even today, here is this guy that I live with, who I am married to, who I've been with for 8 years, but is *THAT really* the person that I've been with for 8 years? I think that a lot of his DNA has changed. It is really, I hope I can swear on your tape, but it is kind of mind fucking you know? I look at this person and I'm like,

“Okay, you’re the person that I fell in love with, but there’s not a lot left of that person.” There really isn’t. If you saw him walking down the street, you may have really good transgender-dar,¹⁵ but he is as male as you can look, I’ll tell you that. He works out. He has gotten really in shape ‘cause it has always been his dream to have that male body. He is like, “Well, if I’m going to have it, I’m going to have it be as good as it can be.” I don’t know, he had a softness about him before that I really loved—not just physically, but emotionally.

For Karen, the transition process has drastically altered her partner’s body so that he in no way resembles the woman that he once was. While it is clear that she finds the loss of his soft feminine body to be troublesome, she also notes that transitioning has hardened his emotions as well. In these examples, respondents indicate that transitioning from female-to-male may masculinize more than transmen’s physical bodies. In a sense, transitioning can also lead to transmen behaving in ways consistent with social constructions of masculinity.

These respondents explain the emotional changes that transmen undergo as being caused by the transition process. More specifically, they attribute the changes to biological explanations such as testosterone altering transmen’s behaviors and emotional capabilities. In the above example, Karen claims that her partner’s DNA has changed, indicating that she thinks of him as a fundamentally different person at the biological level. Taking testosterone changes the physical bodies of transmen in significant ways. Respondents recognize this, but they further assert that testosterone also causes changes in transmen’s emotions and behavior. They believe that testosterone literally transforms transmen into men physically, mentally, emotionally, and biologically. This thinking is based on essentialist ideologies, which assert that there are specific biological “male” and

¹⁵ “Transgender-dar” is the ability to identify a person as being transgender (eg., an internal “radar” that enables one to recognize transpersons).

“female” traits that influence how we behave and think as gendered beings. By blaming the emotional and behavioral changes on testosterone, respondents prevent themselves from addressing alternative reasons for those changes.

The newfound inexpressiveness of some trans-identified partners may be the cause of learning how to be a social man. For example, transmen may learn to be inexpressive as they learn to do gender “correctly” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Sattel (1976) argues that male inexpressivity serves as a means to acquire and maintain power within a patriarchal society. Through inexpressivity, men appear to be rational and calculated in their decision-making, thus enabling them to retain positions of power (Sattel 1976). If the socialization of men involves holding men accountable so that they appear rational and inexpressive, then transmen will also experience the same type of pressure as they learn how to “do masculinity” correctly (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Over the course of relationships, people change in terms of how they look, act, and feel. Trans-couples and non-trans-couples alike, go through changes and transitional periods in their relationships where partners’ bodies change over the life course. Over time, new and different life experiences can cause individuals to think, act, and feel differently. In this sense, non-trans and trans-couples are quite similar. However, with trans-couples, one partner may alter their body with surgeries or hormones and begin to live as a differently gendered person. Thus, in this aspect, non-trans and trans-couples are significantly different from one another. Coping with these changes causes partners of transmen to experience conflicting emotions where they are both happy for their trans-

partners that they love and support yet are somewhat saddened by the shifting bodies and behaviors of their trans-partners.

Conflicting Emotions

Partners of transmen sometimes feel at odds with the shifting bodies and emotional responses of their trans-partners. While transmen most often embrace their changing bodies, partners may not feel as positively. I must emphasize that not all partners feel negatively towards their trans-partners' new bodies. However, several partners *did* discuss negative or mixed emotions about the transition process or their transitioning partners. Mel, for instance, describes how the physical changes of transitioning caused differing reactions for both her and her FtM partner:

The other thing that I really had to mourn—I really had to go through a period of mourning was that and you know it was hard because, there was just a period like after he started T, where things that would make him really happy and excited, would make me really sad and depressed—like when he started growing a beard and *really* passing in public. He would get really excited and I would be upset.

Mel acknowledges that the masculinizing effects of testosterone become something that her trans-partner wishes to celebrate, while she feels somewhat reluctant to embrace the changes. She explains that having facial hair led to him passing in public, something that is problematic for her. Recall that Mel is extremely passionate about retaining her visibility as a partner of a butch woman. Although she was somewhat saddened by the physical changes themselves, she also has a problem with losing her queer visibility. As her trans-partner acquires the status of a social man (something he has desired for quite some time), she loses her visible status as a member of the larger queer community. In this way, transitioning can become a serious point of contention for couples in that it

provides one partner with the visibility that they desire while simultaneously denying the other partner the visibility they wish to have. However, transmen can also lose their connection to the queer community as they transition. While they acquire the social status of “men,” they also lose their visibility as butch women and as members of a larger queer community. Because of this, transmen can also experience conflicting emotions due to the social consequences of passing as cismen.

Susan describes how attempting to maintain her connection to the lesbian community can further create ambiguous feelings:

I had a struggle with it—if I spend time in lesbian community, am I betraying James? That is something I have to struggle with... Am I rejecting his transness or am I putting myself in a situation where it would seem like I was hunting for a girlfriend?

For Susan, remaining connected to the lesbian community and her lesbian identity is incredibly important. Susan finds that doing so can lead to questions surrounding her loyalty to her trans-partner. Such a statement points to the ambivalence that exists between the lesbian and transgender communities. Susan presumes that her involvement with the lesbian community by default implies that she rejects her partner’s trans-identity, indicating that an individual cannot easily be a member of both communities. As previous scholarship finds, transpersons often face discrimination and exclusion from the gay and lesbian communities (Gamson 1995; Halberstam 1998b; Kendel, Devor, and Strapko 1997). Ultimately, Susan feels that her lesbian identity is at odds with her status as a partner of a transman. Susan’s fears are consistent with the distrust and mistreatment of FtMs by the lesbian community (Halberstam 1998b). Individuals attempting to maintain

ties to both communities may find their efforts to be incompatible with the views of the (presumably) opposing communities.

In some cases, partners of transmen find it necessary to both hide and suppress negative feelings so that they appear to be fully supportive of the transition process. Those negative feelings that partners do experience often cause them to feel guilty because they feel that on some level, they are betraying their trans-partners. Below, Karen explains that she hid her negative feelings because she knew such feelings were inconsistent with what she was supposed to be feeling:

I think a lot of what I felt was suppressed for a really long time. I didn't even say a lot of it to my therapist at first because it kind of felt like a betrayal of his joy on some level because it is a good thing, right? This is supposed to be a really happy time and a good time and all of a sudden I'm like, "What the hell? Wait a minute!"

Karen understood what emotions she was *supposed* to have, or at least, what she *thought* she was supposed to feel. As she understood it at the time, she felt that *both* of their expected emotional reactions were supposed to revolve around what her partner wanted. This expectation of positive and happy emotions derives from the needs and desires of the trans-partner while ignoring the feelings of the partners of transmen, who may not initially feel as positive about the transition. When partners of transmen hide their negative feelings, they do so in order to be supportive of their trans-partners as they undergo significant changes. For Randi, maintaining a supportive role for her former trans-partner took priority over her own feelings and needs at the time that they were still involved with one another:

There were times where I was unhappy or maybe thought about leaving the relationship, but I felt like I couldn't. I was his entire social support. That would

scare me and I didn't want to do that. I loved him very much. It was just...there was a lot on the transition. There was so much after care after the top surgery—that was really difficult on our intimacy. Post-op, our intimacy really changed because I was always afraid of hurting him. It was just weird. The things we were used to doing—even cuddling in bed. It was hard to cuddle for months. We had all this other stuff going on. It was stressful.

In this instance, Randi clearly experiences mixed emotions for her former partner and his transition. While she loved her former partner and supported him, she was unhappy and found the transition to be stressful. She also believes that she was her former trans-partner's only support system. Because of this, she initially refrained from leaving the relationship so that he had someone to support him throughout the transition process. Ultimately, the transition process can be trying for both transmen and their partners. However, much of the focus tends to exist around the emotional needs of the FtM partner who is going through the transition process. These examples indicate that the transition process also influences partners of transmen. Furthermore, partners of transmen must engage in emotion work (Hochschild 1979) throughout the transition process so that they may buttress the needs of their trans-identified partners. This involves being openly supportive of their trans-partners and the changes they go through. In some instances, it also consists of suppressing one's own feelings so as to maintain a supportive front to their FtM partners.

In sum, the above narratives point to the trend of focusing on the experiences and feelings of the FtMs while ignoring those of partners. During the interviews, many of the partners seemed incredibly excited about the prospect of participating in the research and pointed out that what I was doing was important. A few respondents indicated that they felt as if their experiences *as partners* lacked validation in general, within the trans-

community, and in some cases, by their own partners. This research makes it clear that both individuals in trans-couples deserve attention, as the transition process influences both FtMs and partners of FtMs in their day-to-day lives. By focusing on the experiences of both partners in these types of relationships, researchers can gain a better understanding of the complexities of transitioning—a process that ultimately shapes the lives of transpersons as well as those closest to transpersons, such as their partners, friends, and families.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Throughout this research, I focus on how transitioning shapes the social and intimate lives of FtMs and partners of FtMs. I discover that transitioning has profound social and private consequences for transmen and partners of transmen. Because transmen live within a heteronormative culture that only recognizes two forms of gender expression, as they become more masculine in their gender presentation and acquire the physical characteristics of men, they find that they blend into the existing gender structure (Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). This change causes others to hold them accountable for doing gender in a way that is consistent with hegemonic masculinity (West and Zimmerman 1987).

As transmen begin to interact with other social actors as men, they learn that behavior that was once allowable when they were social women is no longer acceptable now that others perceive them to be men. These experiences point to the highly gendered organization of social interactions because it shows that different expectations exist for men and women as they engage in social interactions with one another. FtM transpersons also explain that when they do act in ways that are consistent with feminine behavior, other people react to those actions differently now that they read as men. This means that social actors assign gendered meanings to individual behaviors and mannerisms. In other words, the meaning of an action changes depending on the perceived gender of the individual performing the act. For example, a woman touching another woman during a conversation has a different meaning than a man touching a woman (or another man)

during a conversation. As we learn how to do gender, we begin coding certain behaviors as masculine or feminine (West and Zimmerman 1987). Therefore, when we engage in social interactions, we use that “gender knowledge” to assign meaning to those interactions. These practices become clear when studying the experiences of FtM transpersons who have lived *as women* and *as men*.

When transmen live up to societal expectations of what it means to be a man, both they and partners of transmen must deal with the various intended and unintended consequences of transitioning. In this research, I find that passing as men causes both transmen and partners of transmen to lose their queer visibility. While transmen often want others to view them *as men*, they also want to retain their visibility as part of the larger LGBTQA community—a community they have been a part of for much of their lives. When others read them as men rather than butch lesbians, they and their female partners appear to be heterosexual couples, preventing the LGBTQA community from identifying them as one of their own. The fact that changing one’s gender presentation influences how other people read that individual’s sexual orientation indicates that social actors perceive gender expression and sexual desire as interdependent categories. Such thinking is founded upon heteronormative descriptions of gender and sexuality.

In addition to losing their queer visibility, partners of transmen must also cope with the loss of their formerly feminine partners. Partners of transmen struggle with the transition because it changes FtM transpersons both physically and emotionally. For individuals who prefer intimacy with female-bodied individuals, being in a relationship with a FtM transperson can be incredibly difficult. However, the fact that some partners

remain in relationships with FtMs and maintain their sexual desire *for* FtMs lets researchers know that sexual attraction and intimacy are *not* necessarily contingent upon sexual identity or the (sexed) bodies of intimate partners (Ochs 1996).

Transitioning also influences how transmen display and experience emotions. In order to account for shifts in emotional capacities, several respondents claim that the administration of testosterone alters how transmen experience emotion. More specifically, they argue that testosterone makes transmen more like biological men with respect to how they think and feel. These beliefs are incredibly essentialist in that they point to biology (testosterone) to explain the changing behavior and emotional responses of transmen. This line of thinking prevents respondents from addressing other potential reasons for changing emotions. For instance, as transmen learn to do gender as men, they may also learn that it advantages them to be inexpressive (Sattel 1976; West and Zimmerman 1987). Furthermore, these arguments point to the influence of heteronormativity within the trans-community because they explain gendered behavior in terms of essentialist beliefs. While FtMs and partners of FtMs, by their very existence, appear to openly resist heteronormativity, further analysis of their narratives shows that heteronormative beliefs continue to prevail within the trans-community.

Summary

In the data chapters, I cover three main themes. First, I discuss how transitioning leads both transmen and partners of transmen to change how they conceptualize sex, gender, and sexuality. Being exposed to alternative forms of gender and sexual expression causes respondents to rethink heteronormative ideologies about sex, gender,

and sexuality (Shapiro 2007). Respondents report that their ideas shift away from rigid and restrictive definitions and towards more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality. However, in respondent narratives the significant impact of heteronormative and essentialist ideologies becomes apparent, indicating that escaping the influence of these ideologies may be impossible (Butler 2004).

Second, I describe how FtMs are subject to the social pressure of doing gender, and in this case, relearning how to do gender for their new gender presentation. Through FtMs social interactions with men, women, and children, they learn that certain expectations exist for how they should behave, and that these change during and after transition. Their narratives provide researchers with examples of how gender plays a role in social interactions and how individuals attribute gendered meaning within those interactions. As transmen do gender in ways that are consistent with hegemonic masculinity, both they and partners of transmen must cope with the consequences.

Third, I detail the losses that FtMs and partners of FtMs experience through the transition process. While previous research touches on the lost visibility that transmen deal with (Dozier 2005; Green 1999 and 2005; Schilt 2006; Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009), it avoids focusing on the in-depth experiences and consequences of that lost visibility. Previous research also focuses on the benefits that transmen receive once they begin passing as social men (Dozier 2005; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Some scholars criticize transmen and transwomen for passing because they believe that it perpetuates inequality (Lorber and Moore 2007; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). I argue that passing can also lead to negative consequences for

transmen and partners of transmen who, in this study, desire to maintain their queer visibility in a culture that only recognizes two acceptable forms of gender expression.

Partners of transmen are subject to various effects of the transition process, indicating that studies of transmen should also include analyses of individuals closest to transmen. To date, the experiences of partners of transmen are relatively untouched within social scientific research, with the exception of how the discomfort transmen feel towards their female bodies shapes how partners of transmen view their own bodies (Pfeffer 2008, 2009) and how partners of transmen perform more housework and emotion work than do their FtM partners (Pfeffer 2009, 2010).

In short, my research sheds further light on the significant influence that transitioning has on the lives of partners of transmen. As the bodies of transmen gradually change from woman to man, partners of transmen experience intense emotional responses and in some cases, feel they must mask their negative emotions so as to appear fully supportive of their transitioning FtM partners. Thus, based on my findings, research on transpersons and transitioning must become inclusive of the experiences of all individuals that are influenced by the transition process. Furthermore, in order to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of transitioning and its effects, research must address both its positive and negative consequences.

Limitations

As with all research, there were several limitations to my study. First, nine out of ten of the respondents identified themselves as white. The one respondent who identified as Hispanic is a partner of a transman. Therefore, I was unable to determine what the role

of race is for FtM transpersons as they undergo the transition process and cope with the various social and private consequences of transitioning. While Mel, a white female partner, did indicate that her FtM partner is of South Asian descent and feels that his race does play a role in how others interact with him, I was unable to speak with her partner or any other transman of color in this study. As Schilt (2006) contends in her research on transitioning FtMs in the workplace, race does appear to play a role in how other people interact with transmen once they begin passing as men. Schilt (2006) explains that racial stereotypes, such as perceiving Black men as a threat, come into play for transmen of color.

My sample was also homogenous with respect to level of education. All of my respondents have had the opportunity to acquire some form of a college degree: two are currently working on their Bachelor's degrees; three have Master's degrees, one individual is currently in a Master's program; one has a Doctoral degree; two individuals are currently in a Doctoral program; and one began a Doctoral degree, but never finished. Having such a highly educated group of respondents is incredibly limiting in that it prevented me from understanding the significance of level of education as it pertains to the transition process.

In addition to race and education, I was not able to focus my analysis on the role of class within the transition process. While I did not learn the actual salaries of respondents, I did learn their professions; the majority of respondents were either students or working professionals (tax accountant, customer service supervisor, counselor, and media relations). These positions may not pay extremely well, but this did

not deter respondents from pursuing expensive transitional procedures such as therapy, hormone treatment, and surgical procedures. Indeed, almost all of the transmen and partners of transmen that I interviewed indicated that the FtM-identified person had already begun hormonal treatment and had some form of surgery (top-surgeries in the case of my respondents). These individuals would not have been able to acquire these treatments or surgeries if they did not have the financial resources to do so.

Undergoing surgical and hormonal procedures can be incredibly expensive, as many respondents pointed out in the interviews. All of the FtMs interviewed indicated that they had taken some form of testosterone as well as had various forms of top-surgery. However, almost all of the respondents, both FtMs and their partners or former partners, indicated that FtMs were unable to pursue bottom-surgery because of the high costs involved. Respondents also indicated that the current technology lacks quality and cannot provide transmen with ideal outcomes (functioning phalluses that both look and feel acceptable). These findings suggest that those individuals who have access to resources such as money, time, and decent physicians are in better positions to transition in ways that allow them to alter their bodies physically. Because most of my respondents were able to have some form of surgery, I was not able to determine the consequences of having *no access* to resources. Further research should include those individuals that identify as FtM transpersons but are unable to pay for expensive surgeries or hormonal supplements and therapies. This would enable researchers to gain a better understanding of the role class plays in transitioning (or not transitioning).

The small number of research participants (ten) also limits this study. I had chosen to look at a very specific sub-group of an already relatively small population. I focused this study on the experiences of FtM transpersons and their current or former partners. I further required participants to have been in a romantic relationship prior to the disclosure of one partner's FtM trans-identity. This requirement complicated the recruitment process in that I was not able to interview everyone who was interested in participating in the study. Additionally, I would have been able to conduct more interviews with FtMs and partners of FtMs if I had had more time available. Although these limitations are certainly important, they did not prevent me from identifying important patterns that exist for transitioning FtMs and partners of FtMs.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research project has the potential to contribute to the existing gender scholarship in that the experiences of the transgender community shed new light on the intersections of gender and sexuality as well as the highly gendered organization of social life. While I found important themes in this research, I believe further research is necessary to uncover the significance of those themes. For instance, I learned that the larger trans-community uses what I call "trans-normative" ideologies, which sometimes guide how FtMs think and act *as transmen*. Interestingly, these trans-normative beliefs are largely shaped by heteronormative ideologies, causing some transmen and partners of transmen to think and act in ways that are consistent with rigid and dichotomous definitions of gender and sexuality. Future research should address this topic to determine

what influence these guidelines have in the lives of transgender individuals as well as their partners.

I also explain that transitioning affects the lives of partners of transmen. In this research, I find that transitioning causes partners of transmen to experience multiple forms of loss. Very little research exists on the experiences of partners of FtMs (Pfeffer 2008, 2009, 2010). Additional research should attempt to explore how partners of transpersons experience and cope with being in a relationship with someone who chooses to transition. Because previous research on FtMs tends to focus on the benefits that transmen receive when they transition (Dozier 2005; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009), further research should also address how transitioning creates negative consequences for transmen and the people that they have close relationships with. By focusing on the negative implications of FtM transitions, researchers gain insight into the benefits of womanhood as well as the ongoing regulation of men and the performance of masculinity. Ultimately, studying the experiences of individuals that move from one gender expression to another enables gender scholars to understand the significant role that gender plays in the day-to-day lives of social actors. Furthermore, it points to the highly constructed nature of gender and sexuality.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: Transforming Lives: Exploring the Impact of Transitioning on Female-to-Male Transpersons and Partners of Female-to-Male Transpersons

Name of Investigator: Megan M. Tesene

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp

This consent form describes the research study to help you decide if you want to participate. It provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights as a research subject.

- If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the researcher for more information.
- Do not agree to participate in this study unless the researcher has answered all of your questions and you decide that you would like to be a part of the study.

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this study is to learn about the gender and sexual identities of individuals involved or previously involved in a relationship where one partner disclosed their FTM identity after the relationship had already begun.

As a participant of this research you will participate in an in-depth interview. The interview will focus on the transition process of FTMs and partners of FTMs. You will be asked a series of questions which will revolve around these experiences. Your interview will take approximately 1 hour to 1.5 hours, and will be audio-taped. If you are uncomfortable with being recorded during the interview, you can opt not to be recorded. If this is the case, I will take notes throughout our discussion. To protect your privacy, your actual name will not be used in transcripts made from the interview, or in any presentation or publication. All tapes, notes, and transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible only by the investigator and the faculty supervisor. After transcription, audio tapes will be destroyed.

Risks of this study are minimal, however it is possible that during our interview you may experience discomfort in discussing your personal experiences or worry about confidentiality issues. Every precaution will be taken to minimize these risks. First, you are free to choose not to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. Second, you can stop the interview at any

time with no consequence. Third, you are free to use pseudonyms or fake names when referencing your family members or friends. Your participation is voluntary and if you choose to not participate, you will not be penalized in any way. You may also withdraw from the study without penalty after the interview has taken place. There is no cost or compensation for participating in this study.

Possible benefits from participating in this study include the opportunity to explore and reflect on your own experiences. Additionally, the information you provide could potentially contribute to existing knowledge on the experiences and lives of the transcommunity and their significant others. The information may be published in an academic journal or presented at scholarly conferences. In addition, the data collected in this study may be used in future research by the project investigator.

If you have questions about the study or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study, you may contact the project investigator Megan Tesene at 515-240-1239, the faculty advisor for the project, Dr. Marybeth C. Stalp, at 319-273-6235 or call the Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Criminology at the University of Northern Iowa at 319-273-2786. You can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

Agreement:

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

(Signature of participant)

(Date)

(Printed name of participant)

(Signature of investigator)

(Date)

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS—FTM PARTNER

Basic demographic information: participants are asked but not required to provide race, gender identity, sexual orientation, occupation, educational background, and religious affiliation.

When did you know you about your own trans-identity?

Coming Out

How did you feel prior to coming out to your family, friends, and partner?

How did you prepare yourself to come out to these individuals?

How long did it take you?

Tell me about when you first discussed your trans-identity with your partner. How did it go?

Can you describe the reactions of your friends? (Friends of individual and friends of couple)

- a. Reaction of family?
- b. Reaction of Work?
- c. Reaction of LGBTQ community? (if applicable)

Transition Process

Why did you finally decide to transition?

What steps have you taken thus far in the transitioning process?

Will you be going through any other changes?

How do you feel about the transition process so far?

How did you/are you respond/ing to the effects of testosterone, surgery, or other forms of body modification?

Does your partner have a role in your transitioning such as helping with testosterone shots, recovery from surgery, moral support, etc?

Relationship

Could you tell me a little about your relationship? How long have you been together OR how long WERE you together? How long ago did you separate (if applicable)?

If separated, did transitioning have a role in the separation? Could you tell me about it?

Have/did these changes created any stress within your relationship? If so, how has it/is it affecting your relationship?

What sort of changes has/did the transition process had/have on your partner? (How did he react physically and emotionally?)

Has/did transitioning had/have an effect on intimacy with your partner?

Passing

Have you noticed any changes in your social interactions with friends, family members, partner, strangers, at work?

When you're out socially, how do others perceive you? How does that make you feel?

What about when you and your partner are out together? How does that make you feel?

How important is it for you to be perceived in a certain way (as a man or transman, queer/straight, etc) by others in your everyday interactions?

Sexual & Gender Identities

Has there been a shift in your sexual identity? If so, could you explain the change to me?

Has there been a change in your partner's gender or sexual identities? If so, in what way?

Have your ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality changed since disclosure?

Children

Do you have any children or plan on having children? If so, what sort of effect does your/will your trans-identity have on your childrearing?

Final Question

What would say is the biggest impact this transition has had in your life?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS—PARTNER OF FTM

Basic demographic information: participants are asked but not required to provide race, gender identity, sexual orientation, occupation, educational background, and religious affiliation.

Relationship Background Info

Could you tell me a little about your relationship?

How long have you been together OR how long WERE you together?

How long ago did you separate (if applicable)?

If separated, did transitioning have a role in the separation? Could you tell me about it?

Transition Process

How did you initially **feel** when your partner disclosed their trans-identity to you?

What was your initial **reaction** when your partner told you that he was trans and wanted to begin the transition process?

Were you open about your feelings from the beginning or did it take time to tell you partner (or others) about your feelings?

Have your feelings changed since disclosure? If so, how?

What steps has your partner taken thus far in the transitioning process?

Is he going to be going through any other changes?

How do you feel about that?

How did you/are you responding to the transition process?

How did you/are you responding to the effects of testosterone, surgery, or other forms of body modification?

Do you have a role in your partner's transition process? Do you help in anyway, such as administering testosterone, helping after surgeries, moral support, etc.?

What sort of changes has/did the transition process had/have on your partner? (How did he react physically and emotionally?)

Did these changes put any stress on your relationship? Can you describe how it affected/ is affecting your relationship?

Has/did the transitioning process had an effect on intimacy with your partner? In what way?

Passing

When out socially, how do others perceive you and your partner? How does that make you feel?

How important is it for you that others perceive you and your partner in a specific way? (As a queer couple, trans couple, straight, etc)

Coming Out

Have you come out to your family as a partner of a transman?

How did you feel prior to coming out to family and friends?

How did you prepare yourself to come out to these individuals?

How long did it take to come out to friends/family (if applicable)?

Can you describe the reactions of your friends? (Friends of individual and friends of couple)

a. Reaction of family?

b. Reaction of Work?

c. Reaction of LGBTQ community? (if applicable)

Sexual & Gender Identities

Has there been a shift in your own gender or sexual identity? Could you describe it to me?

Have your ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality changed since disclosure?

Has there been a shift in your partner's sexual identity?

Children

Do you have any children or plan on having children? If so, what sort of effect does your/will your trans-identity have on your childrearing?

Final Question

What would say is the biggest impact this transition has had in your life?

APPENDIX D: DETAILED PARTICIPANT DATA

Angela is a 25-year-old Hispanic female who identifies as a lesbian. While she identifies as a lesbian, she explains that she is attracted to women and transmen, but not biological men. She formerly dated a FtM-identified transperson. However, since separating from her first FtM trans-partner, she has since begun a relationship with a biological female who identifies as genderqueer and prefers the use of male pronouns. Her genderqueer partner is not on testosterone but wants to take herbal supplements in order to masculinize his female body. Angela explained that he presents as masculine but is unsure of whether or not he fully identifies as trans. He (her current partner) believes that in order to be trans, he must want certain things, such as hormone therapy or surgical procedures (double mastectomy or genital reconstructive surgery).

James is a 53-year-old white FtM transperson who identifies as bisexual. James lived for the majority of his life as a woman, getting married in his 20s and having three children. He described himself as previously only being attracted to women. However, since transitioning, he recognizes and accepts that he is also attracted to men. He is currently married to Susan, one of the other respondents who I describe below. James has been on testosterone since 2001, had top surgery in the spring of 2002, a hysterectomy in 2002, and changed his name in August of 2002. If he had the financial resources, he believes that he would undergo a metoidioplasty, a genital reconstructive surgery.

Karen is a 46-year-old white female who identifies as queer. Karen had been in a 20-year heterosexual marriage prior to dating her FtM partner. She left her husband and said that she was questioning her sexual identity. This led her to dating women and her

current partner, who at the time, identified as a butch lesbian. She is married to her FtM partner whom she has been with for the past eight years. They met in 2002 and started dating in 2003. Her partner did not come out to her until Feb of 2005. She explained that he was not really aware of his trans-identity until then. Her partner has taken testosterone since November of 2005 and will continue to do so. He had chest surgery (double mastectomy) in 2006 and a hysterectomy in 2007. He is also planning to have a phalloplasty in the future. Although the surgery is expensive, Karen believes that it will be worth it. She has come to realize that the cost is worth it because her partner's mental health is at risk if he does not get the surgeries that he needs. She understands that he must go through the physical changes in order to maintain good mental health.

Liam is a 32-year-old white FtM who does not identify with any particular sexual orientation. He is married to Nicole, one of the other respondents in this study. They have been together for ten years and are currently married. He told Nicole about being trans approximately one and a half years into their relationship. Liam has been on testosterone for 8 years and had reconstructive chest surgery in 2005. He has not had bottom surgery (genital reconstructive surgery), but said that if the medical technology were more advanced, he would consider it. At the time, he feels as though he is "as transitioned as he can be." He has changed his status to male on his driver's license, which allowed him and his partner to be legally married.

Mel is a 31-year-old ciswoman who identifies as having a queer sexual orientation. She remains coupled to her FtM trans-partner whom she has been involved with for ten years. Initially, they identified as a butch-femme couple. Her partner began

transitioning approximately five years ago. Since beginning the transition process, he has changed pronouns, takes testosterone, and has had top surgery (double mastectomy). He has not had genital reconstructive surgery and is not seriously considering it because the technology does not exist to provide transmen with a functioning penis that also feels pleasurable to both partners. If the technology did exist, Mel explains that her partner would probably have bottom surgery and that she would be okay with that change. Mel has been with ciswomen in the past and described herself as being attracted to men and men's bodies. However, when talking about her sexual orientation, she emphasized her attraction as primarily towards butch women.

Nicole is a 35-year-old white female who does not consider herself to have a sexual orientation. She is married to Liam, and explained that Liam being trans was not an issue and she believes this to be the case because he was the first female-bodied person that she had been in a relationship with. Nicole explains that if she had identified as lesbian, she thinks it may have been more problematic. Prior to her relationship with Liam, she never really had a sexual identity or orientation. She described herself as being attracted to people for their personality and emotional attributes rather than the physical bodies that they possess.

Randi is a 28-year-old, female-bodied, self-identified genderqueer whose sexual orientation is queer. She is no longer in a relationship with her FtM partner who disclosed his trans-identity and began transitioning during their relationship. She acknowledged that while there were several reasons they are no longer together, the transition did play a role in their separation. When asked to describe what queer meant to her, she said that she

never felt as though the terms lesbian, gay, or bisexual were appropriate. When she thinks of queer, she thinks of stepping outside of gender and sexual binaries. Randi is attracted to women who are more masculine. Randi also indicates that she recently has found herself attracted to more feminine women as well. She has been in relationships with three different transmen. We discussed her relationship which met the study requirements (disclosing trans-identity *after* relationship had already begun). Randi explained that dating someone who was transitioning was difficult for her despite the fact that she had been in a relationship with a transman before. During their relationship, her partner changed his name, began using male pronouns, started taking testosterone, and had top surgery (double mastectomy).

Susan, is a white 42-year-old female who identifies herself as a lesbian. While she identifies herself as a lesbian, she explains that she is attracted to both women and transmen. She and James are married and have been a couple for the past twelve years. Prior to dating, they knew each other as lesbians within the lesbian community of their (at the time) Midwestern town. James began transitioning once they moved as a couple to the Pacific Northwest eight years ago. Susan explained that James waited to begin transitioning until all three of his children finished high school. She acknowledges and accepts that James wants to have genital reconstructive surgery, but also confirms that she enjoys his body in its current state.

Tucker is a 38-year-old transman who identifies as queer with respect to his sexual orientation. While he is primarily attracted to lesbians, he acknowledges that he is somewhat open to the possibility of dating men. He is no longer with his lesbian partner

who he initially disclosed his trans-identity to over the course of their relationship. Tucker has been on testosterone for seven years and had top surgery in March of 2005. At this time, he has no desire to have any form of genital reconstructive surgery. He explains that he would only consider a hysterectomy for serious medical reasons.

Zane is a 28-year-old FtM-identified transperson who considers his sexual orientation to be queer. For Zane, being queer means that his sexual desires fall outside of the norm. In the past, he mostly dated lesbians, but more recently, he has been dating other transmen. Zane is both a FtM transperson and a former partner of a FtM transperson. He has been on testosterone for four years and had top surgery approximately three and a half years ago. He plans to continue taking testosterone and believes that he will have a hysterectomy at some point in the future. Zane's former partner is currently female-bodied and identifies as genderqueer, but is leaning more towards transitioning. His former partner has changed pronouns with some friends as well as within the transcommunity, while continuing to use female pronouns in other settings. His former partner has not taken any testosterone nor had any surgeries at the time of the interview. Zane explains that his former partner's gender is more complex than wanting to be a man. More specifically, Zane's former partner is unsure if he wants to be a transman because he believes that being a transman includes taking testosterone, having top-surgery, and having a desire to have a penis.

APPENDIX E: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bottom-surgery: Genital reconstructive surgery in which an individual may choose to have their genitalia reconstructed so that it appears “male” or “female.” For FtM transpersons, bottom surgeries include hysterectomy, oophorectomy, metoidioplasty, scrotoplasty, and phalloplasty.

Butch: A lesbian who has a gender presentation that is “masculine.”

Butch-Femme: For lesbians, there sometimes exists a butch-femme dynamic in intimate relationships where one partner is more masculine (butch) and the other partner is more feminine (femme) (Kennedy and Davis 1993).

Cisgender: “Cismen” and “ciswomen” are terms commonly used within the transgender and queer communities when referring to a person who is not transgender. These terms are preferred over terms such as “biological men” or “biological women” (Pfeffer 2009).

Cisman/cismen: Biological man or biological men.

Ciswoman/ciswomen: Biological woman or biological women.

Double-mastectomy: The surgical removal of both breasts.

Femme: A lesbian who has a gender presentation that is “feminine.”

FtM: “female-to-male” or sometimes “female-towards-male.” This represents individuals that are born “female” at birth, but identify as a boy or as a man. In some cases, individuals may choose to present their gender as masculine so that others identify them as a man.

Gender: “The vast array of social and cultural constructions (involving bodily comportment, manner of dress, social roles, etc.) that individuals adhere to once they have been assigned to a particular sex category (thus marking an individual as a “girl,” “boy,” “woman,” or “man” (Pfeffer 2009:viii).

Gender Identity: “Refers to one’s subjective sense of being a boy, girl, man, woman, or some combination thereof” (Pfeffer 2009:ix).

Gender Expression: An individual’s social presentation of gender.

Genderqueer: An umbrella term used to represent individuals that have a gender identity that is not consistent with heteronormative standards.

Heteronormativity: Refers to the “ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” (Kitzinger 2005:2) where there are only two genders determined by corresponding biological sex category. Heteronormative beliefs also purport that opposite sex/gender attraction is the only “normal” or “natural” form of sexual attraction for human beings (Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

Hysterectomy: The “surgical removal of the uterus” (Pfeffer 2009:ix).

LGBTQA: Acronym representing the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community.

Metoidioplasty: “Surgical release of the tissues keeping the clitoris (which is enlarged due to the administration of testosterone) tethered to the body” (Pfeffer 2009:ix).

MtF: “male-to-female” or sometimes “male-towards-female.” This represents individuals that are born male at birth, but identify as a girl or as a woman. In some cases, individuals may choose to present their gender as feminine so that others identify them as a woman.

Oophorectomy: The “surgical removal of the ovaries” (Pfeffer 2009:ix).

Passing: When others perceive transpersons as being a part of a sex/gender category that is consistent with that transperson’s gender identity.

Phalloplasty: The “surgical creation of a penis” (Pfeffer 2009:ix).

Queer: An umbrella term used to describe individuals whose sexual identity or expression is inconsistent with heteronormative standards.

Read: To “read” someone via gender presentation is to perceive an individual as being either a male or female (sex), and as either a man or woman (gender).

Sex: category assigned to an individual at birth such as “male,” “female,” or “intersex.” Sex designation primarily depends on one’s genitalia, however sometimes medical professionals will use hormones or chromosomes in determining an individual’s sex category.

Sexual Identity: How one identifies with respect to sexual attraction (eg., gay, straight, bisexual, queer, etc.).

Scrotoplasty: The “surgical insertion of testicular implants” (Pfeffer 2009:ix).

Stone Butch: A “stone butch” is a masculine lesbian who does not allow her partner to touch her intimately (Halberstam 1998a; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Nestle 1992).

T: refers to “testosterone.” This reference is quite common among female-to-male transpersons who often take testosterone either by injection, pill, or a gel-based substance in order to masculinize their bodies.

Top-Bottom: A term used within the gay community which describes the relationship dynamic between two gay sexual partners. The “top” is the partner who penetrates while the “bottom” is the partner who is penetrated.

Top-surgery: Chest reconstruction surgery. This often involves having a double-mastectomy where both breasts are removed.

Trans: “An abbreviated term that refers to transgender’ and/or ‘transsexual’” (Pfeffer 2009:x).

Transgender: An umbrella term for individuals who feel that their gender identity does not match their prescribed sex status.

Transman: A female-to-male transperson.

Transsexual: A type of transgender person who chooses to physically alter their body through hormonal treatments and/or surgical procedures. The goal is to bring their gender identity and physical (sexed) body into alignment (often with heteronormative standards).

Transition: The process by which a trans-identified individual will bring their gender expression into alignment with their gender identity (Pfeffer 2009). Transitioning can involve changing style of dress, hair, body comportment, pronoun use, legal sex/gender status, and altering one’s physical body through hormones or surgical procedures.